

MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE

HUMAN FREEDOM IN DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

JOHN D. LAING

 Kregel
Academic

Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom in Divine Sovereignty

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DEDICATED TO
MY WIFE, STEFANA,
AND OUR CHILDREN,
SYDNEY, SOPHIA, AND ALASDAIR,
AND TO MY PARENTS,
ED AND LIZ LAING

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INTRODUCTION

THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

One of the most widely held doctrines of Christianity is that of meticulous divine providence. The doctrine of providence refers to God's governance and preservation of the world—his ongoing activity in the creation—and it is “meticulous,” because it refers to the smallest details of all events. Thus, we speak of God being “in control” of all things, and as Helm rightly notes, this is no mere academic exercise: “Far from studying what is static or abstract, we are to be concerned with God's action in our world, and with how, according to Scripture, that activity is carried out.”¹ Providence is as much a concern of *practical/applied* theology as it is of *systematic* and *philosophical* theology, and therefore, this book should be of interest to all Christians.

Scripture supports belief in meticulous providence, noting that (for example) it is God who makes the clouds rise and the rain fall (Ps. 135:6–7), and ensures the successes of individuals and nations (Job 12:23; Ps. 75:6–7). God is providential over salvation. The apostle Paul assures the Ephesians that their salvation was part of God's plan, noting that God “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). Similarly, God's providence applies to the specific destinies of individuals. The Lord declares to both Jeremiah and Isaiah that they were appointed prophets before their conceptions (Jer. 1:5; Isa. 49:1–6). Providence also refers to God's sustainment of the natural order. For example, God causes the grass to grow (Ps. 104:14; cmpr. Jesus's statement that he “clothes the grass of the field,” Matt. 6:30). Somewhat related, the Psalmist declares that God gives the lions their food (Ps. 104:28), but this passage also highlights a key difficulty with meticulous divine providence, namely the problem of evil and suffering. Since lions are carnivores, when God provides their food, he hands over a poor zebra or wildebeest. Any robust view of meticulous providence must deal with this issue.

1. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 17. Thus, he concludes, the doctrine of providence is uniquely relevant. He writes, “As the word, ‘providence’ indicates, ‘the providence of God’ is a rather formal way of referring to the fact that God *provides*. And what could be more practical, relevant or down-to-earth than that?” *Ibid.*, 18.

MODELS OF PROVIDENCE

Several models of providence have been articulated in the history of the church. It is best to group them according to how they explain the relationship between God's control, creaturely (i.e., human) freedom, and evil and suffering. Five basic approaches are discussed in theological circles: Process Theology (or Finite Godism), Open Theism, Arminianism/Middle Knowledge, Calvinism, and Theological Fatalism. Two have been largely dismissed as heretical/unorthodox (Process Theology and Theological Fatalism), one is typically thought to be heterodox (Open Theism), and two have been widely held among orthodox Christians (Arminianism/Middle Knowledge and Calvinism). I will argue that middle knowledge best deals with the issues at hand. It is my hope to offer a less philosophically rigorous and more biblically and theologically oriented explanation. But first, a word or two about each of the alternatives is in order.

Process Theology

Process Theology is a uniquely American movement. It grew largely out of the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead and was popularized by Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, David Griffin, Shubert Ogden, and others. Much of the discussion surrounding Process Philosophy and Theology is rather technical and can be dense, so we will focus on the basic ideas and their impact upon the Process view of providence.²

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Process Theology is its emphasis on change as fundamental to reality, or in traditional philosophical categories, the primacy of *becoming* over *being*. It is often presented as an alternative to traditional Christian theology. For example, in his provocatively entitled work, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, Hartshorne sets forth what he calls six common errors about God that have pervaded classical theism in the West: God as absolutely perfect and therefore unchangeable; Omnipotence conceived as power to act; Omniscience as knowledge of all things; God's unsympathetic goodness (or impassibility); Immortality as a career after death; and Revelation as infallible. The primacy of change in Process thought extends to God himself, who is conceived as the Process of Reality Itself. It should come as no surprise, then, that Process Theology is *panentheistic* and sees all of reality in God. He is the sum total of all things (to be distinguished from *pantheism*, which says that all things are God/gods), and when things change in the world, God is also changed.

2. An excellent introductory text on Process Theology is authored by Mesle. While the book is arguably simplistic in its treatment of some themes, it lays out the basic ideas current in process thought in a way that is accessible to both the layman and the college or seminary student. C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1993).

While the primacy of *becoming* over *being* is surely a hallmark of Process Theology, most process thinkers have argued that it is not at its heart. Rather, relationality and love are key, as Loomer points out: “To speak technically for a moment, what is distinctive about this mode of thought is not the substitution of ‘process’ for ‘being,’ although it does do that. Such a substitution says simply that becoming rather than being is ultimate. . . . It is rather that the distinctive aroma of this outlook occurs when you combine the ultimacy of process with the primacy of relationships. It is really relationships that process is all about.”³

This emphasis on love is thought to distinguish the God of Process Theology who is eminently loving and relational (requiring change) from the God of so-called classical theism, who is impassible and immutable. Hartshorne argues that if humans add something of value to the life of God, then he can change for the better, and this should not be seen as a defect, but rather a necessary corollary to his relational nature.⁴ God’s loving nature is also taken to imply that providence has little to do with his *control* of events or history. Instead, it should be conceived in terms of *persuasion*. Two arguments are typically given for this claim. First, true love allows for the freedom of others, as exemplified in human relationships. Cobb and Griffin note, “Process theology’s understanding of divine love is in harmony with the insight, which we can gain both from psychologists and from our own experience, that if we truly love others we do not seek to control them.”⁵ Just as loving human relationships are characterized by respect for the individuality of the other, so also is divine love for creatures. God does not cause events to occur or force persons to act in certain ways; rather, he lovingly suggests or persuades persons to do what he wishes for their good. Second, if God did control everything, then he would be the cause of evil. Process Theology prides itself on the strength of its theodicy. In the Process view, God is in no way responsible for evil because his providence is not causative. In fact, he quite literally *cannot cause or prevent evil* and is simply part of a process that includes evil!

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3. Bernard M. Loomer, “Process Theology: Origins, Strengths, Weaknesses,” *Process Studies* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 245.
 4. Hartshorne writes, “Do or do not finite things contribute something to the greatness of God? . . . Consider that, according to the tradition, God could have refrained from creating our world. Then whatever, if anything, this world contributes to the divine life would have been lacking. Moreover, if God could have created some other world instead of this one, God must actually lack what the other world would have contributed. If you reply that the world contributes nothing to the greatness of God, then I ask, what are we all doing, and why talk about ‘serving God,’ who, you say, gains nothing whatever from our existence?” Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 7–8.
 5. John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 53.

Ironically, this strength for its theodicy also serves as a weakness for its eschatology. Providence through persuasion cannot guarantee that God's will can prevail or that he will emerge victorious. Cobb and Griffin admit as much when they note that the Process God cannot prevent specific evil acts.

Process theism . . . cannot provide the assurance that God's will is always done. It does affirm that, no matter how great the evil in the world, God acts persuasively upon the wreckage to bring from it whatever good possible. It asserts that this persuasive power with its infinite persistence is in fact the greatest of all powers. But it does not find in that assertion assurance that any particular evil, including the evil of the imminent self-destruction of the human race, can be ruled out. God persuades against it, but there is no guarantee that we will give heed.⁶

It is not a far leap from the claim that God is unable to prevent specific evil acts to the claim that he cannot prevent ultimate destruction due to the overwhelming forces of evil.

Nevertheless, most Process thinkers are optimistic about God's ability to persuade humans to goodness and the prospects of humanity's positive response. For example, Suchocki points to God's ongoing loving draw upon man as a source of hope: "It bespeaks the providence of God for increasing opportunities for intensities of harmony within the world. The redemptive reality of God's communal nature is the ground of hope that the world, in all its ambiguities of freedom and finitude, can nonetheless actualize itself in congruity with God's aims. The communal structure of redemption is a constant given in the world, an unfailing resource for our good."⁷ Still, she cannot say with any degree of certainty that evil will be overcome; its defeat is seen only as a hopeful possibility. Similarly, but not acknowledged, Process thinkers must also admit the possibility that the *ambiguities of freedom and finitude* (in her words) could eventuate in the defeat of Good and in the total destruction of life.

Process thinkers have criticized traditional theism, arguing that it is primarily based on philosophy (rather than the Bible). This claim cannot be sustained, though it serves as a valuable reminder against allowing speculative philosophy to dictate theological belief. It is true that most Christian theologians were trained in classical philosophy and sometimes drew upon it in their conceptions of God, but that proves nothing. After all, there is much that Socrates and Plato got right!⁸ And just because

6. Ibid., 118.

7. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 124.

8. Justin famously suggested that Socrates and Plato may have been Christians before Christ insofar as they worshipped the true Reason (*logos*) who took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. See Justin, *First Apology*.

theologians referred to philosophy or philosophical categories in their writings, they were not necessarily driven by philosophy. In point of fact, the primary emphasis in the theological work of Augustine, Athanasius, Irenaeus, and even Origen, was Scriptural exegesis, and the theological writings of the Cappadocians—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa—were extensions of their sermons and commentaries on Scripture.⁹ Moreover, there was also a tradition within the early church, following Tertullian of Carthage, which argued against the incorporation of philosophy in Christian theological work.¹⁰ Even in the medieval work of Anselm and Aquinas, fidelity to Scripture is the hallmark of theology; Aquinas did not shy away from offering correctives to Aristotle when necessary. It is also worth noting that Process Theology/Philosophy is heavily indebted to Greek philosophy itself. While Process thinkers criticize traditional theism for its similarities in emphases to the philosophy of Parmenides, who highlighted *being* over *becoming* as primary, they ignore the fact that their own thought is at least equally similar to the philosophy of Heraclitus, who argued that *becoming* is fundamental to reality.¹¹ As Cooper has aptly put it, “If classical theism represents ‘the God of the philosophers,’ then pantheism counters with ‘the *other* God of the philosophers.’”¹² Merely pointing out similarities to ancient Greek philosophy is not a critique.

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9. Not to mention that they were not “Western,” but were from the East.
10. Tertullian’s famous words, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?,” nicely summarizes the basis of this tradition. These words have engendered much consternation, discussion, and debate among scholars. While they have traditionally been seen as a general disdain for philosophy, this does not seem to garner a full appreciation for Tertullian’s own understanding of pagan philosophy. Tertullian was most concerned with the adoption of pagan categories uncritically, and warned against an unspiritual worldview. Still, he also argued that the *logos* of which the pagans spoke was/is Christ: “And we, in like manner, hold that the Word, and Reason, and Power, by which we have said God made all, have spirit as their proper and essential *substratum*, in which the Word has inbeing to give forth utterances, and reason abides to dispose and arrange, and power is over all to execute.” Tertullian, *Apology* 21.
11. Heraclitus’ saying, “You can never step in the same river twice” is emblematic of his commitment to the thesis that reality is constantly in flux. Heraclitus’ metaphysics is typically seen as an opposition to Parmenides’ belief that all is One and therefore, change is illusory. These two are seen as epitomizing the extremes and introducing the intractable problem of the One and the Many. Is reality unified or is it a multiplicity? If One, then change does not occur and all things are united. This leads to pantheism. If Many, then there is no stability and nothing is real because all is fleeting. In most cases, the Heraclitean view of reality results in either atheism or it devolves into pantheism again (as here, though panentheism—the idea that all is in God—is the position of Process Theologians). Colin Gunton has argued that only a triune God provides a metaphysical basis for holding the two in proper tension. Process Theology’s dipolar theism was incapable of doing so, but a singular being who is three distinct persons allows for both One and Many to be true without either superseding the other. See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
12. John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 19.

Open Theism

Open Theism is the name given to a relatively recent development in theology which begins with the concept of divine self-limitation, but extends it to include God's inability to know the future with certainty. Open Theists contend that God's decision to create free creatures limits his foreknowledge because free actions cannot be certain until the free agent acts. That is, statements about how persons will freely act cannot be true prior to the act itself, and therefore, cannot be known (even by God). In saying this, Open Theists are not claiming God has no knowledge of future events, or that God *could not* have comprehensive foreknowledge, for he could have determined the future by causing it to play out in a particular manner, but that would compromise freedom and does not appear to be what he actually did.

Proponents of the Open view offer four basic arguments to prove that God does not have foreknowledge: 1) the traditional model of God (with foreknowledge) is based on Greek philosophy and should therefore be discarded; 2) the Bible suggests that God does not know the future; 3) a relational view of God requires that he be *open* to human actions and reactions, and this precludes his knowing them ahead of time; and 4) divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible, and since human freedom is a given, God cannot know the future.

Open Theists have joined a growing number of theologians and philosophers who have begun to question the traditional attributes of God. Attributes such as immutability, impassibility, omnipotence, omniscience, and eternity have either been called into question or radically reinterpreted. The most common complaint is that they are strongly influenced by Greek thought and hardly reflective of the biblical revelation. For example, John Sanders argues that the early church was made up of people who were constantly in dialogue with Greek contemporaries and who utilized pagan categories to explain and/or defend the Christian view of God. This appropriation led to confusion and a perversion of theology. He writes, "Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God. But the classical view of God worked out in the Western tradition is at odds at several key points with a reading of the biblical text."¹³

William Hasker agrees, claiming that many attributes originate in Plotinus and Neo-Platonism rather than the Bible.¹⁴ He argues that they grew out of the Greek philosophical ideal of permanence, which sees

13. John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God*, eds. Clark Pinnock, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 59.

14. He writes, "The philosophy of neo-Platonism, as seen in Plotinus and later on in Pseudo-Dionysius, was a powerful molding force in ancient and medieval theology. Today, however, neo-Platonism really does not exist as a living philosophy, though it continues to have considerable indirect influence through the theological tradition." William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 127.

change as defective. Permanence is virtually synonymous with perfection because if a being were perfect, then a change would diminish him in some way. Therefore, if God is perfect—and it is presupposed that he is—then he must be unchanging in every way: in thought, personality, and being (i.e., immutable, impassible, and eternal understood as timeless). Hasker writes:

In the philosophical lineage stretching from Parmenides to Plato to Plotinus, there is a strong metaphysical and valuational preference for permanence over change. True Being, in this tradition, must of necessity be changeless; whatever changes, on the other hand, enjoys a substandard sort of being if any at all—at best it may be, in Plato’s lovely phrase, a ‘moving image of eternity.’ And this bias against change has been powerfully influential in classical theology, leading to the insistence on an excessively strong doctrine of divine immutability—which, in turn, provides key support for divine timelessness, since timelessness is the most effective way (and perhaps the only way) to rule out, once and for all, the possibility of any change in God.¹⁵

Hasker argues that we need not be constrained by such an attitude toward permanence and change.

The problem, then, is that the Greek metaphysic came to be accepted *a priori* (at the beginning), and functioned as a sort of lens through which the biblical text was interpreted. This approach has been handed down through the tradition of the church and serves as a dogma of sorts. Sanders explains, “The classical view is so taken for granted that it functions as a preunderstanding that rules out certain interpretations of Scripture that do not ‘fit’ with the conception of what is ‘appropriate’ for God to be like, as derived from Greek metaphysics.”¹⁶ According to Sanders, there is a tension within evangelicalism between a *prima facie* reading of the biblical text, and what he terms a *theologically controlled* reading of the text. The Greek ideas of perfection and truth have so pervaded the theology of the West that they often dictate how the text is understood and interpreted, and this has led to an incorrect view of God’s nature.¹⁷ Thus, proponents of the Open view claim that a fresh examination of the biblical materials will reveal that God is much more personal and has a more dynamic

15. Ibid., 129.

16. Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 59.

17. Sanders writes, “In the history of the church, guidelines were developed, often unwittingly, for interpreting biblical metaphors. The guidelines, once established, functioned like axioms in geometry, taking on incontestable certitude. They were formulated under the belief that the Greek philosophical way of speaking of God (impassible, immutable, timeless, etc.) was superior to the anthropomorphic way (father, changeable, suffering, etc.). The church has followed this path for so long that we now take this way of thinking for granted.” John E. Sanders, “God as Personal,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 169.

relationship with the creation and this requires change in his knowledge and responses. Since his knowledge can change, he does not have comprehensive knowledge of the future.

One of the favorite passages they cite is found in the book of Exodus, where Moses intercedes on behalf of the people of Israel following the incident with the golden calf. God informs Moses that he intends to destroy the Israelites and make a great nation of his descendents instead. When Moses intercedes for the people, God decides not to go through with the destruction (literally, “changes his mind”; Exod. 32:7–14).

Open Theists argue that this story demonstrates that God is genuinely responsive to the creation and as a result, experiences change in his knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions toward creatures. As Richard Rice puts it, “The repentance mentioned in this case clearly applies to a change that took place in God, not in his people.”¹⁸ He is quick to point out that this is not to say God’s nature or purpose changed. On the contrary, God’s changing of his mind *preserved* his plan for the ages: “his ultimate objectives required him to change his immediate intentions.”¹⁹ Sanders agrees, noting that this passage indicates that God is faithful to his project of redemption—to his covenant with Abraham—even though he allows humans to influence the specifics of how his plan will be met.²⁰ Nevertheless, the key point for Openness advocates is that a real change took place in God; he changed his mind about what he was going to do. As Rice puts it, God’s intentions “are not absolute and invariant; he does not unilaterally and irrevocably decide what to do.”²¹ God takes human response into account as he deliberates.

This reading of the passage raises at least two problems for the idea that God knows everything about the future. First, it seems incoherent to claim that God knows the future and yet changes his mind about how he will act. Commenting on a similar passage that describes God’s revocation of his anointing of Saul as king over Israel (even though it seemed to be a perpetual call; 1 Sam. 13:13–14), Sanders writes, “God nevertheless experiences a genuine change in emotion from joy to grieving over Saul. It is questionable whether it is coherent to affirm both that God has always known of this event and that God now has changing emotions about that event.”²²

18. Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 28.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Sanders writes, “But God has different options available, and the one that he will choose is not a foregone conclusion. Sometimes God allows human input in regard to the option that is realized. As God permitted Abraham’s intercession for Sodom (Gen. 18:16–33), so now God allows Moses incredible access to him. With or without human input, God remains faithful to his project of redemption.” John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 66.

21. Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 29.

22. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 72.

Sanders' point is this: Suppose at one moment, God knows that he is going to anoint Saul king over Israel and that Saul will subsequently act in such a way that God will then revoke that blessing. After that, God anoints Saul as king over Israel, and Saul acts in just that way. God is then described as changing his mind regarding his anointing of Saul and removes his spirit from Saul. Since God knew that he was going to revoke it from the beginning, it is not really a *changing* of his mind when he does so. Thus, Sanders concludes, either at that first moment, God did not *know* what was going to happen in the future, or the Bible is in error when it describes God as changing his mind regarding Saul's kingship.²³ Boyd agrees, arguing that a responsible reading of the biblical text requires a rejection of comprehensive divine foreknowledge because God did genuinely repent. He writes:

We must wonder how the Lord could truly experience regret for making Saul king if he was absolutely certain that Saul would act the way he did. Could God genuinely confess, "I regret that I made Saul king" if he could in the same breath also proclaim, "I was certain of what Saul would do when I made him king"? I do not see how. Could I genuinely regret, say, purchasing a car because it turned out to run poorly if in fact the car was running exactly as I knew it would when I purchased it? Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.²⁴

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23. Sanders considers and rejects the suggestion that the biblical writer was utilizing anthropomorphic language and that therefore, descriptions of God as repenting or changing his mind should not be taken as literal descriptions of the divine cognitive processes. He asks how one is to distinguish between those passages which are literal descriptions of God and those which are not. According to Sanders, the proponents of this view do not offer clear criteria. In reference to divine-repentance passages, he writes, "On what basis do these thinkers claim that these biblical texts do not portray God as he truly is but only God as he appears to us? How can they confidently select one biblical text as an 'exact' description of God and consign others to the dustbin of anthropomorphism?" *Ibid.*, 68. Sanders is not convinced by Ware's discussion of passages which claim that because God is *not human*, he does not repent. See Bruce Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (1986): 431–46. Sanders points out that Hosea 11:8–9 is problematic for Ware's thesis because it claims that God repents because he is not human: "Following Ware we have a real problem on our hands because the Bible teaches both (1) that God cannot change his mind because he is not human and (2) that God is literally does change his mind because he is not human." Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 68–69. Sanders does admit, though, that the images of divine repentance found in the Bible are metaphorical in nature. This does not mean that they are not an accurate reflection of God: "The metaphor of divine repentance signifies God's ability to remain faithful to his project while altering his plans to accommodate the changing circumstances brought about by the creatures." *Ibid.*, 72.
24. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 56.

Second, there appears to be a moral problem with God's anger being provoked by creaturely actions if he knew what those actions would be beforehand. Sanders approvingly quotes Terence Fretheim, who argues that God's anger should be immediate at the point of his knowledge of sin rather than at the point of its occurrence.²⁵ There seems to be an underlying assumption here that it is somehow dishonest for God to be angry in response to actions that he already knew would occur. A truly responsive anger would be triggered not by the action, but rather by the knowledge of the action. Here, too, Sanders' conclusion is that either God did not know of the creature's sinful actions before they were committed, or the Bible is in error when it describes God's anger being fueled in response to those sinful actions.

Open Theists often claim that God's personal relation to the creation demonstrates that the traditional doctrine is insufficient. For instance, Pinnock presents two models of God for consideration: 1) monarch and 2) loving parent. It is the second model that Pinnock believes to be the correct, biblical one. It offers a picture of a God who is in dynamic relation with free creatures he loves. God creates a world with significantly free personal agents in it, and humanity contributes to the divine life because God allows true freedom in an open future.²⁶

Sanders claims that the metaphors used in the Bible to describe God are the best sources for discovering who God *really is*. The anthropomorphic metaphors describe God's relatedness to the creation, most importantly, to humans. He contends that when these metaphors "are allowed to speak within a personalistic conception of God, then a quite different image [of God] emerges" from that in the church's tradition.²⁷ God is seen as personally involved and related to his creation in such a way that he finds pain in unfaithfulness (of humanity) and joy in love. This depicts him as the defenseless superior power. He is creator and sustainer, but because he chose to create free creatures, he has allowed himself to be *defenseless, or vulnerable*. The personal relationship God has with humanity is dynamic, which requires him to be responsive and precludes him from timelessly decreeing his actions before creation. As Sanders puts it, "Yahweh's wrath can change to kindness, his power to defenselessness, and judgment to forgiveness because he is the *living personal God*."²⁸

Rice develops these concepts in his claim that divine love is limitless, precarious, and vulnerable. It is limitless because the lover has an unlimited concern for the beloved, it is precarious because it is not controlling but passive (e.g., as the father patiently waiting for the prodigal son,

25. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 72. See Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 40–44.

26. Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 144.

27. Sanders, "God as Personal," 175.

28. *Ibid.*, 176.

Luke 15), and it is vulnerable because the lover grants the beloved power over himself.²⁹ By loving humans, God makes it possible for them to cause him grief, joy, suffering, or delight. Love is not coercive, and therefore, the outcome is not set. Sanders writes, “God elects to establish a world in which the outcome of his love is not a foregone conclusion. God desires a relationship of genuine love with us and this, according to the rules of the game God established, cannot be forced or controlled and so cannot be guaranteed.”³⁰ The point is that a genuine, personal, loving relationship between God and his creatures can only exist if God does not possess foreknowledge and is not controlling because a loving relationship must be open for both parties. If one party knows how things will turn out or controls the other, then he is not really vulnerable and not really loving.

A final reason some have rejected divine foreknowledge is they see it as incompatible with creaturely freedom due to the asymmetry of past, present and future or to the nature of freedom. While the past and present can be said to exist *now*, the future cannot; instead, it is *open* to development, and this means it does not yet exist to be known. Rice explains:

Future free decisions do not exist in any sense before they are made. So the real difference between the traditional view of God and the alternate proposed here is not that one attributes perfect knowledge to God, while the other doesn't. Both affirm that God knows everything there is to know. They differ, however, in their concepts of what there is to know. . . . [I]f future free decisions do not yet exist, they are not there to be known until they are made. And the fact that God does not know them ahead of time represents no deficiency in His knowledge.³¹

Similarly, it is argued that statements about free actions cannot be true prior to the person acting because it is *in acting* that a statement about the action is made either true or false.³² Statements about future free actions cannot be true and therefore, cannot be known, even by an omniscient God.

29. Sanders agrees, writing, “God is willing to wait if need be and to give it another try. Waiting implies a degree of passivity and dependency, whereas trying again implies that the efforts of love have failed to achieve the desired end as yet.” Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 177.

30. *Ibid.*, 178.

31. Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 53–54. Originally published under the title, *The Openness of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1980).

32. Thus, Swinburne concludes that the doctrine of omniscience can only be salvaged if conditional future contingents do not have a truth-value until they come to pass. Statements which describe how creatures will freely choose to act in the future are neither true nor false until the individual is faced with the situation, and makes a decision about how to act. Swinburne asserts, “There seems to be one way in which the theist might avoid this conclusion [that omniscience is incompatible with freedom]. He could coherently assert that there was a perfectly free and omniscient person, if it were the case that all (or certain particular) propositions about the future were neither true nor false. . . . But if propositions about the future actions of

In addition to these considerations, Pinnock argues that the doctrine of divine eternity—that God knows free decisions timelessly—does not alleviate the problem.³³ In fact, most who have jettisoned comprehensive divine foreknowledge have done so only after carefully weighing and rejecting the proposed solutions to reconciling it with human freedom. For example, Swinburne argues that the incompatibility of foreknowledge and freedom can only be overcome if backward causation is possible. Since backward causation is impossible, no one, not even God, can know how an individual will freely choose from among competing alternatives in the future.³⁴ Hasker agrees, noting that the Open Theist rejection of divine foreknowledge is based in their belief that the past cannot be changed: “what lies at the root of them [controversies over compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom] is a disagreement over a fundamental intuition or metaphysical datum—the intuition often expressed by saying, ‘You can’t change the past.’”³⁵ Thus, Open Theists conclude, because arguments for compatibilism fail, incompatibilism follows.

Several answers to Open Theism’s objections are available. In response to the claim that the traditional model of God has been greatly influenced by Greek philosophical and metaphysical categories, two comments must be made. First, as already noted this is not really a critique of traditional theology. As Wolterstorff has noted, there are many areas in which the Greeks simply *got it right*!³⁶ The platonic view of reality may be, in essence,

agents are neither true nor false until the agents do the actions, then to be omniscient a person will not have to know them.” Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (1977; Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 179. Swinburne makes the further claim that a powerful argument can be constructed along the same lines for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and divine freedom. An argument of this sort stands as evidence against an answer to the divine foreknowledge/human freedom problem that simply denies that humans are free, because it is a central tenet of Christianity that, at least, God himself is free!

33. He writes, “If God knows eternally that A will be the selection and not B, then it is still an illusion that any genuine alternative will exist at the time of the decision. It would appear to me that actions which are infallibly foreknown or timelessly known cannot be free in the required biblical sense.” Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” 157.
34. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 174–75.
35. William Hasker, “Foreknowledge and Necessity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (April 1985): 121. Hasker surveys several of the proposed answers to the dilemma of foreknowledge and free will, from divine timelessness, to Ockhamism, to the thesis that the past is not really necessary at all. In the end, though, he concludes that those who argue for compatibility ultimately abandon “implicitly if not explicitly,” libertarian freedom. *Ibid.*, 154. Bruce Reichenbach has challenged this article, claiming that Hasker’s argument for incompatibilism equivocates on the use of *bring it about that God has not always believed* such and such. See Bruce Reichenbach, “Hasker on Omniscience,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1987): 86–92. For Hasker’s reply, see William Hasker, “The Hardness of the Past: A Reply to Reichenbach,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (July 1987): 337–42.
36. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Address to the Evangelical Philosophical Society” (Address presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, Boston, November 18, 1999). For example, many of our rules of logic come from Aristotle, many of our theories regarding music and harmony come from Pythagoras, and much of our thought regarding law and

fundamentally correct. What is needed is a demonstration of error on the part of the Greek metaphysical categories/ideas that the early church fathers incorporated into their thought about God and the Bible. In other words, an evaluation of the biblical evidence for each model is required.

Second, proponents of the Open view, like those of the Process view, have also been influenced by Greek thought. Recall the philosophical argument against compatibilism; it claims that the future does not yet exist and that therefore, propositions about future contingents cannot be true. This argument, which articulates *a priori* commitments of Open Theists, was first formulated by Aristotle!³⁷ Thus, those who dismiss divine

justice comes from the Greeks and Romans. Thus, to simply point out the influence of Greek thought on our conception of God is to say very little and certainly does not serve as a viable critique.

37. Aristotle argued that if all affirmations and denials must be either true or false, then nothing happens by chance; there is no contingency. Consider two claims regarding the future:

John will freely eat a piece of chocolate cheesecake tonight;

and

John will not freely eat a piece of chocolate cheesecake tonight.

According to Aristotle, it seems that one must be correct, while the other is false. But if, for instance, the first is true and the second is false, then the first is true necessarily, and there is no contingency in my decision to eat the cheesecake tonight. He further argues that it is of little help to say something like

John may freely eat a piece of chocolate cheesecake tonight;

or

John may not freely eat a piece of chocolate cheesecake tonight;

because neither one is true. For, when faced with the decision to eat or not-eat the cheesecake, I will do one or the other. No matter which I do, the statements regarding what I may do are both false. Thus, Aristotle concludes, it seems that the truth of propositions regarding the future (even those thought to refer to contingents like the statements about my eating or not eating the cheesecake) discounts contingency and future events happen necessarily.

Now, this argument by Aristotle has been a set-up. He has led the reader into a quagmire from which he now intends to lead his followers out. He appeals to experience, noting that there are many events which come about not by necessity, but by the free decisions of men; there are many potentialities. All things, contrary to the argument presented, do not happen of necessity.

This, however, is not to say that all things do not have to either be or not be. In fact they do; for any given contingent future event, it must either come to pass or not come to pass, although it cannot be said whether it will or not. For example, it is true that I will either eat a piece of chocolate cheesecake, or I will not, and so one of the two propositions regarding what I will do is true. The necessity has to do with the option of eating cheesecake, not with how/what I decide. Thus, one of the options must be true, though it cannot at this time be known which, because neither is true *now*. Aristotle explains, "For one half of the said contradiction must be true and the other half false. But we cannot say which half is which. Though it may be that one is more probable, it cannot be true yet or false. There is evidently, then, no necessity that one should be true, the other false, in the case of affirmations and denials. For the case of those things which as yet are potential, not actually existent, is different from that of things actual. It is as we stated above." Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* ix., in *Aristotle: The Organon I*,

foreknowledge because of its alleged incompatibility with an open future have also been strongly influenced by Greek thought.

In response to the biblical argument, many traditional theologians have pointed out that there is a hermeneutical problem with the Open Theist case. Many passages point to God's unchanging nature, and those that describe God as changing his mind refer to his posture toward the given situation at that time, rather than to his lack of knowledge. These, and other examples cited by Open Theists, will be addressed later.

The Open Theist claim that the traditional conception of God is unloving cannot be sustained, though the tradition has sometimes struggled to reconcile divine love with impassibility. Some evangelical theologians have discarded the concept of divine impassibility and seen divine immutability as a reference to character and being, rather than the totality of who he is.³⁸ Some have seen these attributes as reflective of man's standing before God, which can change, even while God does not.

None of this should lead to a wholesale rejection of the traditional attributes. The idea that God is personal still coheres with many of them, even those highlighted by Open Theism. For example, Open Theists have failed to establish a logical connection between the doctrine of divine timelessness and an impersonal view of God. Christian theologians have long maintained that, even though God exists apart from time, he nevertheless loves the creation eternally. There is no good reason to reject the possibility of an eternal love or an eternal concern for others. The same thing can be said regarding the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. No logical connection has been demonstrated to exist between the doctrine of divine foreknowledge and a lack of personality on the part of God.

As already noted, Open Theism seems to rely on an *a priori* commitment to the Aristotelian claim that propositions describing future contingents are neither true nor false, but Aristotle's position wrongly allows only two options: Fatalism, or the open future. Theological determinism, for instance, stands as a viable alternative; it is not open because everything is determined by God's will, but it is not fatalistic because everything does not happen by necessity—God could choose to cause things to be other than they in fact are.

Likewise, although many of the proponents of an Open view have surveyed the competing alternatives for reconciling divine foreknowledge and creaturely freedom and found them wanting, the discussion is still quite lively. In fact, many within the Christian tradition, if forced to choose between divine foreknowledge and creaturely freedom, prefer to reject the latter instead of the former. For example, Freddoso writes:

trans. Harold P. Cooke, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 141.

38. For example, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 213–19.

Still, I cannot hide my dismay. The likes of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, Luther, Calvin, Molina, Bañez, Suarez, Arminius, Leibniz, and Edwards surely realized that they could spare themselves a lot of philosophical grief if only they would repudiate divine foreknowledge and with it the traditional understanding of divine providence, according to which every event that transpires in the universe, including every free action, is either knowingly intended or knowingly permitted by God prior to creation. Yet not one of these Christian intellectual heroes so much as entertained such a drastic expedient; to the contrary, the very thought of it would have appalled them. Were they less enlightened than we are about the Christian Faith as it pertains to providence and foreknowledge? Were they, as Hasker intimates (p. 191), the unwitting victims of an over-hellenized theology? (Even Luther and Calvin?!) It verily takes one's breath away to suppose so. Yet Hasker and his co-travellers apparently do suppose so.³⁹

Extremely good reasons must be given for rejecting a doctrine that has so long stood at the center of orthodox thought about God. Since good answers to the problem can be given, the Open Theists' claim that God does not have comprehensive foreknowledge must be rejected.

Calvinism

Calvinism is a system of understanding theology most closely associated with the work of John Calvin, and is best known for its approach to understanding God's determining will in providence and salvation.⁴⁰ It conceives of divine providence as a function of God's willing all that occurs. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin hopes to defend his view of divine providence against charges that it makes God the cause of evil. Calvin begins by admitting that God ordains all things, but is careful to point out that the primary concern of God's providential activity is propelling Christians to godliness and defeating evil. He is particularly critical of attempts to evaluate the justice of God's work because humans have no right to call God to account, and ought to respond to God's governance with worship.⁴¹ He also notes that much of God's governance is

39. Alfred J. Freddoso, review of *God, Time and Knowledge*, by William Hasker, *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1993): 100.

40. Horton points out that "Calvinism" is something of a misnomer for several reasons, the chief of which is the historical truth that the Reformed Churches emerged across Europe as a result of the work and thought of many persons with much greater diversity of thought than other reform movements of the time. He writes, "Far more than Lutheranism, Reformed theology was a 'team sport,' whose faith and practice were shaped by international cooperation among many figures whose names are now largely forgotten." Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 29.

41. He writes, "No man, therefore, will duly and usefully ponder on the providence of God save he who recollects that he has to do with his own Maker, and the Maker of the world, and in the

mysterious or secret (i.e., his hidden counsels), so that it is right to say that all things happen by his will, though he causes no evil.⁴² A proper understanding of providence, Calvin insists, will lead believers to seek out God's good will and follow it. This is in contrast to pagan Fatalism, which views providence as an exemption from guilt for sin or an overbearing force that destroys freedom and leads to despair.

Calvin then seeks to answer what is perhaps the most common objection to his determinist view of providence: the ordination of evil and suffering and the justice of God. Later, in the chapter on the problem of evil, these issues will receive further treatment, refinement, and examination, but here we will confine our examination to Calvin's answers to those who complain that God is unjust if he punishes those who injure others (e.g., murder, assault, or steal) when their actions had to have been ordained by his will, and they are themselves instruments of his providence (e.g., instruments of his justice or punishment, etc.). While Calvin admits that a murderer could not have murdered unless God had willed it, he denies that the murderer serves the will of God by murdering. In order to make this claim, he distinguishes between the motives of the human actors, and the use God makes of their evil intentions. They remain guilty because their sins are a result of their own desires, choices, and actions, and God's holiness is not impugned because he simply utilizes their evil actions for his good purposes.⁴³ Most Calvinists appeal to the concept of two wills in God, conceived either as declarative and permissive, or revealed and secret, etc., in order to explain how some events may be correctly described as *willed* by God, but not *servng* his will.⁴⁴

Still, Calvin notes, the primary emphasis of Scripture is upon God's special care and provision for his people and his love for believers.⁴⁵ Christians will thus recognize God's hand in any good they receive, even if it comes by means of earthly instrumentality (e.g., the work of men); God is given the glory for anything truly positive we enjoy.⁴⁶ Similarly, when Christians endure suffering, either as a result of the evil of men or of natural cause, they should recognize that God has willed it for their

exercise of the humility which becomes him, manifests both fear and reverence." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.17.2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster, 1960), 102.

42. He writes, "Therefore, since God claims to himself the right of governing the world, a right unknown to us, let it be our law of modesty and soberness to acquiesce in his supreme authority, regarding his will as our only rule of justice, and the most perfect cause of all things,—not that absolute will, indeed, of which sophists prate, when by profane and impious divorce, they separate his justice from his power, but that universal overruling Providence from which nothing flows that is not right, though the reasons thereof may be concealed." *Ibid.*, 103.

43. *Ibid.*, 1.17.5.

44. Arminians have sometimes criticized these distinctions, but such criticisms are misguided, for any position orthodox on divine foreknowledge and providence must make similar appeals.

45. *Ibid.*, 1.17.6.

46. *Ibid.*, 1.17.7.

good in some way or another. For example, when we are wronged by others, we have an opportunity to learn patience and to exercise humility, grace, and forgiveness; and when disaster strikes, we have an opportunity to exercise self-reflection and, perhaps, repentance. The point, of course, is that God uses even evil and suffering for our good, though we sometimes do not recognize it.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Calvin insists, his view of providence has more to do with acknowledging the Lord for his goodness than with deciding how to act in any given situation (God's Word already tells us this). To see God's providence behind all things should result in humility and self-reflection.

Calvinism tends to have a stronger view of divine causation than Open Theism and Middle Knowledge. Calvin is careful to note that God's sovereignty is *not mere permission*, but that he is *active* or ultimately responsible for all things, and appeals to several biblical examples of evil actions that are ascribed to God (e.g., Babylonian invasion of Judah; Jer. 1:15; 7:14; 25:9; 50:25). He writes, "it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission—as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will."⁴⁸ So Calvin emphasizes God's activity in persons' sinful actions/hardening of hearts. He objects to the claim that God merely permits sin, and instead argues that God's work is active and in some sense, causative: "it is said that the same Satan 'blinds the minds of unbelievers' (2 Cor. 4:4); but whence does this come, unless the working of error flows from God himself (2 Thess. 2:11), to make those believe lies who refuse to obey the truth?"⁴⁹ So God both hands men over to Satan, to a depraved mind, and the like, and deceives them himself. Calvin thus directly claims that God can will the evil of men while also condemning it. The apparent contradiction is due to our limited capacity to apprehend the simplicity of God: "when we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable (1 Tim. 6:16), because it is overspread with darkness."⁵⁰

In order to illustrate his point, Calvin appeals to an example set forth by Augustine wherein two sons—one good and one bad—have opposing wills regarding their father's imminent death. The good son wills, contrary to God's will, that the father live, while the bad son, consonant with God's ultimate will in the matter, but for selfish and evil reasons, wills that the father die. In this case, the evil son's desire coincides with God's will, and the good son, for good and godly reasons (love of his father) has desires

47. Ibid., 1.17.8.

48. Ibid., 1.18.1, 231.

49. Ibid., 1.18.2, 232.

50. Ibid., 1.18.3, 233.

contrary to God's will. This example nicely illustrates how someone with evil desires can have a goal that aligns with what God has determined, but it fails to address the more problematic issue of why God's goal for a given situation is what would typically been seen as bad or evil.

Calvin argues that, even though people sin in accordance with God's will, promptings, and governance, they are still justly condemned because when they act sinfully, they do so out of their own selfish and sinful desires. It is not as though they are aware of his secret will (that they sin) and act out of a desire to be obedient; quite the contrary, they act in direct disobedience to God's precepts/commands. He goes on to offer examples: Absalom sleeping with his father's concubines, Shimei cursing David, Jeroboam leading a revolt of the northern kingdom, and Judas betraying Christ, but unfortunately, he never explains *how* God *willing* that they sin does not itself explain what he means by God willing sinful deeds, save vague references to God's *secret will* (or secret inspiration) and God *willingly permitting* sin (an attempt to deny mere permission and replace it with a more active concept, while still abrogating God of responsibility).

I have emphasized Calvinism's difficulty with the problem of divine control and human sin for a number of reasons here. First, it helps the reader distinguish Calvinism's view of providence from those of Middle Knowledge on the one hand, and Theological Fatalism on the other hand. Second, it shows how Calvinism's conception of freedom is used to claim that creatures freely choose their own actions while those actions are willed or determined by God. Third, it illustrates the claims made later in the chapter on the problem of evil regarding Calvinism's difficulty with the problem. Fourth, it enables the reader to see how Calvin himself addresses the criticism of his strong view of divine determination in providence.

Theological Fatalism

As noted earlier, pagan philosophers and theologians struggled with questions of divine control and human freedom as well. One approach to dealing with these issues was to deny that there is any contingency or freedom and to claim that all things happen by necessity. This view came to be called Fatalism, because in much of the early Greek stories, it was the Fates, and not the gods, who determined the future. In some instances, the gods even seem to be subject to Fate (or the Fates), while in others, the supreme God appears exempt from such control.⁵¹

51. In Norse/Germanic mythology, Fate is most closely associated with the nine Valkyries, whose primary role was to mark those mortals who were to die in battle. This determination appears independent from and even beyond the control of the gods, even Odin, though it is often cast in terms of fulfilling the will of the supreme god. In the *Iliad*, Zeus is portrayed as having the ability to circumvent the Fates, but he nevertheless chooses to allow the fate of his son, Sarpedon, to achieve its end; he dies at the hand of Patroclus, and Zeus is left to mourn the loss (at least as much as is fitting for a god to mourn the death of a mortal!). Elsewhere in the same book, we are told of a conversation between Thetis, the goddess mother of Achilles,

Perhaps the most well-known version of Fatalism from the serious philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans is that of the Stoics, who emphasized the ethical response one ought to have to the Necessity which is a fundamental aspect of reality. Persons are exhorted to *accept*, or come to terms with Nature's prescriptions; acceptance of one's destiny is the key to happiness and ethical conduct. Of course, the pagan notion of Fatalism, with "the Fates" who spin the web of history and dictate the activities and events of all history, is neither an attraction nor a stumbling block to Christians. However, there is a notion of divine providence among some Christians that is close enough in ideology to warrant the name "Theological Fatalism" and is popular enough to demand comment.

At its most basic, Theological Fatalism is the notion that all things, even the actions of God, happen by necessity. God wills all events and actions, and nothing can thwart his will, but his will is set and could not be otherwise. Some versions have the divine will as the direct cause of each and every action, thought, or event, but such a view is not essential to the model. All that is required is the belief that things could not be other than they are. Many times, this belief is tied to the concept of divine perfection. God's perfection must be manifest in his will and actions, and since he must perform the "best," he really only has one option. All of his actions, thoughts, and will are conceived as flowing directly and unchangingly out of his nature (as perfect).

John Piper, a popular Calvinist pastor/scholar, has expressed views dangerously close to this position when, somewhat jokingly, referring to himself as a *seven-point Calvinist*. Matt Perman explains that Piper's two additional "points" are really just what Piper sees as natural outflows of traditional Calvinism as expounded at the Synod of Dort. They are 1) belief in double-predestination, and 2) that this is the best of all possible worlds. Of course, Calvinists have long disagreed over these issues, but the important point to note here is that Piper's position is often adopted uncritically at the popular level in a way that leads to Theological Fatalism.

Piper's claim that double-predestination—the belief that God predestines some to salvation and Heaven and others to condemnation and Hell—follows from his view of unconditional election and is not of concern to us here, controversial though it may be. The claim that this is the best of all possible worlds is much more problematic. As Perman explains, it is the belief "that God governs the course of history so that, in the long run, his glory will be more fully displayed and his people more

and Hephaistos, the blacksmith of the gods, in which she pleads with him to make a new suit of armor and shield for her grief-stricken son after his closest friend, Patroclus, is killed by Hector of the Trojans. Hephaistos agrees to the request, but curiously notes that it will make no difference because it is Achilles' destiny to die at Troy: "Do not fear. Let not these things be a thought in your mind. And I wish that I could hide him away from death and its sorrow at that time when his hard fate comes upon him as surely as there shall be fine armor for him, such as another man out of many men shall wonder at, when he looks on it."

fully satisfied than would have been the case in any other world.”⁵² In other words, God’s purposes and will could not have been equally met or satisfied in any other way. It is not a far leap to the conclusion that God’s nature is such that he had to create and had to do so just the way he did; he really had no alternative in the matter.

To be fair, Piper himself has never (at least to my knowledge) made this claim and has even taken steps to distance his own views from that of Theological Fatalism. While holding to the best of all possible worlds doctrine, Piper maintains that God’s will is the determining factor in his decisions. For example, in commenting on Exodus 33:19, he claims that God was telling Moses, “I am absolutely self-existent and absolutely self-determining. I exist freely, without cause or control from any other. And I have mercy freely. At the deepest decision of my mercy there is no cause or control or constraint by anything outside of my own will. That is what it means to be God, Yahweh. That is my name and the essence of my glory.”⁵³

Piper is to be commended for maintaining the freedom of will in God, but it is hard to see how he can do so consistently while claiming that this is the singular best possible world because of God’s perfection. Piper would likely argue that there is a perfect union of will and nature in God so that his desires *just are* consistent with what his nature dictates, so that God’s freely willing is properly constrained by his perfection. At first glance, this line of argumentation seems both logical and reasonable, but there are good reasons for rejecting it as erroneous and inconsistent with historical Christianity.

Most importantly, it offers an unsophisticated theology because it violates the doctrines of divine aseity, omnipotence, and freedom. God is not self-sufficient because if all his actions are necessary (as an outflow of his necessary nature), then the creation itself becomes necessary (violating the fundamental distinction between God’s being and that of creation). If he had to create, then in some ways he is dependent upon the creation. Under Theological Fatalism, we all become necessary beings of sorts.⁵⁴ Second, Theological Fatalism is based on the false idea that God’s obligation to do the best limits him to only one option. It assumes that there is one “best” option for any given action, but it should be clear that there

52. Matt Perman, “What Does Piper Mean When He Says He’s a Seven-point Calvinist?” posted January 23, 2006, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-piper-mean-when-he-says-hes-a-seven-point-calvinist>.

53. John Piper, “The Freedom and Justice of God in Unconditional Election,” posted January 12, 2003, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-freedom-and-justice-of-god-in-unconditional-election>.

54. Some may wish to point out that the necessity associated with the creation in this view is still of a different sort from the necessity of God. There is not space here to develop an argument for the conclusion, but it would require some kind of principle of transfer of necessity. Still, if both God’s existence and actions derive their necessity from his perfection, then the conclusion seems to follow.

could be several equally good options which are the best way for God to achieve his desired ends.

Another theologian sometimes thought to support Fatalism is Martin Luther, largely due to his polemic against freedom. He denied true creaturely freedom on the basis of the connection between divine foreknowledge and omnipotence on the one hand, and on the basis of human sinfulness on the other hand. According to Luther, since God's foreknowledge cannot err, and since God's will is never thwarted, then whatever he foreknows or wills happens of *necessity*. An extended quote will prove illuminating:

God knows nothing contingently, but...he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. . . . If he foreknows as he wills, then his will is eternal and unchanging (because it belongs to his nature), and if he wills as he foreknows, then his knowledge is eternal and unchanging (because it belongs to his nature).

From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered . . . moreover it is wise, so that it cannot be deceived. Now if his will is not hindered, nothing can prevent the work itself from being done, in the place, time, manner, and measure that he himself both foresees and wills.⁵⁵

Luther clearly demurs free will, claiming that the whole of Scripture speaks out against it.

Though it is his primary concern, Luther does not stop at the denial of one's ability to perform righteous acts. He further claims that when one tries to act freely, he is asserting himself over against God; the doctrine of free will is a manifestation of the sinful nature and is in direct opposition to God, the gospel, and everything that is holy. Luther writes, "it is at the same time certain that free choice is nothing else but the supreme enemy of righteousness and man's salvation, since there must have been at least a few among the Jews and Gentiles who toiled and strove to the utmost of the power of free choice, yet just by doing so they did nothing but wage war against grace."⁵⁶ Free choice, then, is illusory; humans have the freedom to sin, but not the freedom to do good. The human will is enslaved to "sin, death, and Satan, not doing and not capable of doing

55. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. P. S. Watson, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 37–38. I am indebted to William Lane Craig for this quote. See William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?," in Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 142.

56. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 181.

or attempting to do anything but evil.”⁵⁷ For Luther, the doctrine of free will is not only contrary to Scripture, it is an assertion of the creature over the Creator.⁵⁸

While the concern of Luther for preserving the providence of God is admirable, and while it must be duly noted that his arguments against free will were written primarily in the context of a discussion of salvation by grace, which is not aided by any human works, it is still difficult to imagine that when one chooses to eat a hamburger instead of a slice of pizza, he is devoid of an understanding of righteousness, and is waging war against grace. It is also difficult to imagine that when one asserts that a choice to eat a hamburger instead of a piece of pizza is a free choice of the individual creaturely will, he is unwittingly speaking a doctrine of demons against the Scriptures.

Middle Knowledge

Middle knowledge has long been associated with Arminian theology, though it was first put forth by Catholic writers.⁵⁹ Arminianism is often characterized as a polar opposite of Calvinism, but this is not the case. The two are much closer than most think, especially with regard to practical application. More will be said about this later; for now, we should just note that Calvinism and Arminianism represent the orthodox Christian consensus, with Process Theology and Fatalism serving as polar opposites.

In discussions about providence, I have found it helpful to think of the alternate theories as points along a series of sliding scales. Consider the following diagram. Leaving aside problems with proximity to one another and only considering locations of the theories/models relative to the concerns presented, we can see how they compare.

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57. Ibid., 206. This inability, Luther contends, is due to original sin. Since the Fall, humanity has been enslaved to sin and therefore, is not free with respect to any actions, except insofar as the tainted will chooses to sin; it is not forced to sin by God. Luther explains, “Original sin itself, therefore, leaves free choice with no capacity to do anything but sin and be damned.” Ibid., 203.
58. He writes, “In a word, since Scripture everywhere preaches Christ by contrast and antithesis, as I have said, putting everything that is without the Spirit of Christ in subjection to Satan, ungodliness, error, darkness, sin, death, and the wrath of God, all the texts that speak of Christ must consequently stand opposed to free choice; and they are innumerable, indeed they are the entire Scripture.” Ibid., 218.
59. There is some debate about the relationship between Molinism and Arminianism; some argue that Arminius was not only aware of Molina’s work, but incorporated it into his theology, while others dispute this claim. For the former, see Eef Dekker, “Was Arminius a Molinist?,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 47, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 337–52; and for the latter, see Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths & Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 194–97; see also William Witt, “Creation, Redemption and Grace in the Theology of Jacob Arminius” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1993), 363–66.

<i>Less</i>	Direct Divine Control			<i>More</i>
<hr/>				
<i>Lesser</i>	Problem of Evil			<i>Greater</i>
<hr/>				
<i>More</i>	Creaturely (Human) Freedom			<i>Less</i>
<hr/>				
Process Theology (Finite Godism)	Open Theism	Arminianism (Middle Knowledge)	Calvinism	Theological Fatalism

Process Theology has the least amount of direct divine control. In fact, God is unable to control much of anything. This also means that God cannot be charged with responsibility for evil and suffering. Under the Process view, creatures have the greatest amount of freedom as well. By contrast, Theological Fatalism boasts an extremely high degree of divine causation, which consequently leads to a lesser degree of creaturely freedom. The problem of evil is particularly acute for this model. The other models have varying degrees of the three, depending upon where they fall on the sliding scale. It is my contention that middle knowledge best handles these issues, taken together.

ASSUMPTIONS

Before we begin our study of middle knowledge, some preliminary assumptions should be set forth, as all questions related to Providence cannot be addressed in such a short work. In some cases, the reader may feel frustrated at the brevity of the discussion or may wish for a more detailed examination. To them, I can only apologize and suggest further research.

The Nature of God

Theology Proper is the area of systematics that primarily refers to examination of God’s nature and attributes. Thinking about God is at the heart of the theological enterprise, but it has its limitations. Two in particular deserve comment. The first limitation has to do with our finitude and capacity for knowledge. God is infinite and we are finite, and while we desire to know him, we can never fully comprehend him as he is. As Jesus put it, no one has seen the Father except the Son (John 6:46; cf. John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). God is transcendent—beyond the created order—and is therefore, in at least some ways, inaccessible to us. At the same time, he has revealed himself to us, drawn close to us, speaks to us, and condescends for us so that we may know him. In a word, he is immanent. God’s transcendence and immanence must both be respected; to overemphasize his transcendence is to view him as completely other and unknowable, and to overemphasize his immanence is to view him as similar to (or worse, equal to) the creation. The second limitation is related, and

has to do with the limitations of human language to express divine truth. When we speak of God, we always speak analogously: God's love is both like and unlike our love, God's knowledge is both like and unlike our knowledge, etc. As we investigate how God governs the created order, we must remember these two limitations in order to acknowledge the tentative nature of our conclusions.

Divine Omnipotence

One of the most common errors in the doctrine of God is to overemphasize one attribute to the exclusion of the others. Perhaps the attribute most abused in this way is omnipotence, because it is seen as most clearly defining what it means to be God. When one attempts to think about the nature of God, some view of power usually comes into play, most commonly infinite power.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it is unclear exactly what it means to say that God is all-powerful. At first glance, we may be tempted to say that God can do just anything and no action is beyond his ability. Under this interpretation, to say that there are some limits to what he can do is to deny omnipotence and thus, his deity, but most theologians and philosophers have disagreed with this claim.

There is a whole body of literature devoted to answering the complex philosophical questions related to the meaning of omnipotence. Perhaps the most entertaining engagements on the issue came a number of years ago, when a series of articles that sought to answer the age-old question, "Can God make a rock so heavy that he can't lift it?" were published in scholarly philosophy journals. The question was first raised by an atheist in an attempt to demonstrate that the notion of an all-powerful being is incoherent. The ensuing discussion, while somewhat humorous, helped clarify the meaning of divine omnipotence. It does not mean he can do just anything; there are some limitations to what an omnipotent Being can do, but they are not deficiencies because, in most cases, it simply makes no sense to suppose such actions can be performed.⁶¹

60. The task of natural theology—reflection on the nature of God by consideration of the being of God—typically involves such thoughts. Anselm's famous ontological argument may serve as representative.

61. J. L. Mackie first raised the question in the context of discussions over the logical problem of evil. He argued that it makes no sense to suppose that an omnipotent being could make beings that he could not control. Therefore, any appeal to divine limitation in answering the problem of evil denies God's omnipotence and therefore, fails. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64, no. 254 (April 1955): 200–212. Several responses were published with varying degrees of nuance. Richard Swinburne, for example, separated the question into two distinct actions. In effect, he argued that God could make just such a rock because he is omnipotent, but then he could also lift the rock because he is omnipotent. For Swinburne, as long as these issues remain in the realm of the theoretical, God's omnipotence is preserved. If God were to actually create such a stone, then his power would be compromised. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 157–63. Mele and Smith seem to agree; Alfred R. Mele and M. P. Smith, "The New Paradox of the Stone," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (July 1988): 283–90. Others, such as George Mavrodes, Bernard Mayo, and

This clarification was not a new development in theology. Christians have long held that God possesses infinite power, but have likewise recognized at least some limits to the actions he can perform. The most obvious have to do with God's performing actions inconsistent with his nature. Consider the following statements: "God exists" or "God has always existed" or "God is love," etc. It is abundantly clear that God could not, no matter how much he may desire to do so (and I do not think he would), make any of these statements false. For example, he could not make the first false because he would have to exist in order to do so! Similarly, it is generally agreed that God is by nature, loving. He could not cease to be loving because that is, in part, what it means for him to be who he is. Similar points could be made regarding any of God's essential attributes. So far, so good; what has been said is not particularly controversial.

What is not so clear is how other statements thought to be necessarily true could also be outside of God's ability to make false. Take, for example, a mathematical formula: " $1+1=2$." On this view, God cannot make this false. Similarly, God cannot make " $1+1=5$ " true. Instead, these propositions are true (or false) by necessity and could not be otherwise. To suppose that God could, by some act of his will, make " $1+1=5$ " true simply makes no sense. The best we can hope for is to change the meaning of the terms—make "1" really refer to " $2\frac{1}{2}$," or make "=" really mean " \neq ," or make "5" really mean "2," or something of that sort. But to retain the current meanings of the terms and still make " $1+1=5$ " true moves beyond rational comprehension.

When I make this point in class, invariably someone complains that I am trying to force God to conform to "human ways of thinking" or to constrain God's ability or power to "human logic and/or math." In response, I point out that the fundamental laws of logic and math are not mere human constructs, but are instead ways of describing reality, and although some aspects of reality could be otherwise, it is clear that some could not (we have already noted that God's existence and nature are necessary aspects of reality). In addition, if God is rational (in any

Alvin Plantinga, have suggested that the challenge begins with the assumption that God is not omnipotent. If God were assumed to be omnipotent, then the argument would not make sense because it includes a sort of contradiction built into the expectation—that is, to make a rock so heavy that he can't lift it would require that God perform two contradictory actions—and this is the problem with the requirement. Bernard Mayo, "Mr. Keene on Omnipotence," *Mind* 70 (1961): 249–50; George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963): 221–23; "Necessity, Possibility, and the Stone Which Cannot Be Moved," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (July 1985): 265–71; Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 168–73; see also C. Anthony Anderson, "Divine Omnipotence and Impossible Tasks: An Intensional Analysis," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 109–24. Still others, like G. B. Keene and Wade Savage, have argued that the double negatives in the requirement cancel each other out and therefore, amount to nothing. G. B. Keene, "A Simpler Solution to the Paradox of Omnipotence," *Mind* 69 (January 1960): 74–75; "Capacity-Limiting Statements," *Mind* 70 (1961): 251–52; C. Wade Savage, "The Paradox of the Stone," *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967): 74–79.

meaningful sense of the term), then the laws of logic and math may be descriptive of his very nature. Consider the fundamental laws of logic. The law of identity says that something is equal to itself ($A=A$). While it seems almost absurd to say such a thing because it is self-evidently true, the point is this: it makes no sense to suggest that anyone, even an omnipotent Being, could make it false or its opposite true (i.e., $A\neq A$). There simply is no way to articulate what it means for the law of identity to be false. The very suggestion that it *could* be false is literally nonsense.

There are even more serious concerns with denying the laws of logic or suggesting that they are contingent (dependent on God). If the fundamental laws of logic do not hold, then all communication and thought becomes meaningless because words cease to have meaning: $\text{True}\neq\text{True}$, $\text{Omnipotence}\neq\text{Omnipotence}$, etc., and the implications of this are obvious. If $\text{True}\neq\text{True}$, then it may be that $\text{True}=\text{False}$, but this is ridiculous. When I ask students to explain what they mean when they say that God is not bound by human laws of logic, they simply claim that he can do anything, yet they fail to realize that this claim is itself dependent upon the laws of logic being true, for it depends on words having meaning. In fact, if the laws of logic are viewed as contingent, then skepticism and relativism follow. This unforeseen consequence is disastrous for theology, not to mention ethics, discipleship, communication (including divine revelation), and even love!

If the claim that God is not bound by the laws of logic is so erroneous and injurious, why would anyone make it? Why would so many people have difficulty with the claim that God's ability is constrained by them? Perhaps they have in mind some biblical passages that seem to teach God does have power over necessary truths like mathematical formulae and the laws of logic. For example, Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Now to Him who is able to do *above* and *beyond all* that we ask or *think*—according to the power that works in you—to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20–21; HCSB). How can my claim be reconciled with Paul's words here? Does Paul not basically say that divine omnipotence means that God can do things beyond human logic? A close examination of the text will reveal that this is not the case. When Paul notes God's ability to do more than we ask or imagine, he is referring to God's eternal plan of salvation, specifically for the Gentiles.⁶²

62. Throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul explains the complex relationship between Israel and Gentile believers and how God has reconciled Gentiles to himself through Christ and made them recipients of the covenant promises to Abraham. Earlier in the chapter, Paul refers to the redemption of the Gentiles in the church as a mystery: "The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above. . . . This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and partners of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:3, 5–6). Clearly, then, the benediction Paul offers extolling God's ability to work wonders is not meant to refer to a philosophical understanding of the nature of omnipotence, but is instead a song of praise for what God has done in Christ for all humanity.

Two places in Scripture record the rhetorical question, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” The implication is, of course, that nothing is beyond God’s ability, but in both cases, the reference to God’s power has to do with fulfilling his covenant promises: first, to Abraham by seemingly reversing the menopausal process in his wife, Sarah (Gen. 18:14), and second, to Israel by returning the people to the land after the Babylonian captivity (Jer. 32:27). They are not meant to suggest that God can override necessary truths or violate the fundamental laws of logic, even if they do communicate something of the mystery or incomprehensibility of his will and power. One other passage which also appears to teach that God’s power enables him to do just anything is found in Christ’s words, “With God, all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Again, though, the context precludes this interpretation. The words of Jesus here are meant to speak of God’s work of grace in salvation. Jesus had just challenged the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions, give them to the poor, and follow him. When he departed, Jesus told his disciples that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle). Their response was to question the possibility of salvation for anyone. It is at this point that Jesus referred to God’s power to save (all things are possible). Clearly, then, Jesus’s words are meant to refer to salvation. They are not meant to be an exposition on the nature or extent of God’s power. Thus, the point stands: It makes no sense to suppose God can make a contradiction true, or make a necessarily false statement true (or vice versa). These issues are very important for the doctrine of middle knowledge, as will become clear.

A similar but perhaps more dangerous error is to set the attributes in opposition to one another. The most common manifestation of this problem is when God’s mercy is viewed as tempering, or worse, overwhelming, his justice. To see mercy and justice in this way is ultimately disastrous for one’s view of salvation and even atonement. Under this view, the self-sacrifice of God is seen as somehow an unjust act, but merciful nonetheless. Instead, the attributes of God should be seen as working together. Justice, mercy, holiness, wrath, transcendence, immanence, love, etc., are all perfect, infinite, indivisible, and harmonious in God.

Divine Omniscience

Divine omniscience and propositional knowledge

Proponents of middle knowledge make some assumptions about divine omniscience. The first is that God’s knowledge may be conceived in terms of propositional knowledge; he has knowledge of propositions or discrete statements of fact. To say that the content of God’s knowledge is propositional is not to say that he lacks knowledge of ideas or essences or beings, but simply that he knows the truthfulness or falsity (or *truth values*) of statements of a factual nature. For example, while God knows that I am writing this chapter by hand, we may speak of him knowing

the proposition, “John Laing is writing the Introduction by hand.” God’s omniscience can thus be thought of as an infinite number of propositions. This is not a particularly controversial idea, though it may seem somewhat strange to those not acquainted with contemporary discussions of divine omniscience among systematic and philosophical theologians.

Logical order of divine thoughts

The second assumption is that God’s thoughts may be conceived as having a *logical* order. To say that there is a logical order to divine thoughts is really to say that a dependency relationship exists between some of the propositions of divine thought (due to their content). *Before* God can (or in order for God to) know the meaning of any proposition, he must know the meaning of the terms in the statement. For example, it should be obvious that God knows the proposition, “one plus one equals two ($1+1=2$).” Such knowledge, though, is logically dependent upon an understanding of the concept of addition, the meaning of one, the meaning of equals, the meaning of two, etc. Thus, it is proper to speak of God’s knowledge of “one” being logically prior to his knowledge of “one plus one equals two.”

A word of caution is in order here. The language used is meant to protect God’s essential omniscience (that God is, by nature, all-knowing). *Logical priority* is used to mean that while a dependency relationship exists between items in the content of God’s knowledge, there was never a time when God lacked some knowledge. While God’s knowledge of “one” and mathematical concepts is logically prior to his knowledge of “one plus one equals two,” there was never a time when God did not know “one plus one equals two.” Logical priority and logical dependency should not be confused with temporal priority, even though, in human knowledge, they go together because of our ignorance and finitude (e.g., I had to first learn the concepts of “one” and “two” and addition before I could know that one plus one equals two). Although it may seem strange, the concept of logical priority is not particularly controversial among Christian theologians; most Calvinists and Arminians have used these concepts in discussions of divine decrees.⁶³

63. Calvinists have typically debated the order of decrees most hotly. Some have maintained that God’s election should be primary, and so suggest that the first decree (logically) was to elect some to salvation and condemn some to punishment. Following this decree was the decree to create humans, then the fall of humans into sin, and then the death of Christ for the salvation of men. This position is known as supralapsarianism. Others have seen this as both morally repugnant and illogical and have therefore argued that the decree to create humans had to *precede* (in the logical order of things) the decree of the fall of man or the election of some and the condemnation of others. This approach is known as infralapsarianism or sublapsarianism. The positions taken on this issue and the strengths and weakness of each are not relevant for the discussion here; what is relevant is that the concept of logical priority is one that has come to be seen as conventional in talking about the divine mind, especially with respect to God’s creation decisions. As Calvinist John Feinberg writes, “The debate about the order of decrees focuses most precisely on the logical order of the decrees. Although it makes little sense (at least from a Calvinistic perspective) to ask about the temporal order of the divine decrees, one can still ask

For example, it seems obvious that God's decision to create the world the way he did is logically dependent upon his decision to create something. That is, we may say that God's decision to create in general is logically prior to his decision to create a world with green grass or a blue sky, or a world where I exist, etc. This is not to suggest that there was time when God did not know he would create a world with green grass or a blue sky, but it is to say that such knowledge has a dependency relationship with his knowledge that he would create even though he knew all of these truths eternally.

The Nature of Human Freedom

One of the most difficult topics for understanding providence is the nature of human freedom. Two basic models exist: libertarianism and compatibilism. Libertarian freedom refers to the ability to choose between competing alternatives. It is so named because the individual has the *liberty* to choose to perform either of two possible actions; after he chooses, it is proper to say that he had the ability to have chosen other (than he did, in fact, choose). Compatibilist freedom refers to the ability to choose to act in accordance with one's desires. It is so named because it is *compatible* with there being causes internal and/or external to the individual that may be spoken of as being *efficient* for the choice. Put differently, we may say that the individual freely chose the course of action he did, but he could not have done otherwise. Frame explains, "Compatibilist freedom means that even if every act we perform is caused by something outside ourselves (such as natural causes or God), we are still free, for we can still act according to our character and desires."⁶⁴

Proponents of middle knowledge are convinced that libertarianism is correct. There is much to commend it. First, it is the most obvious and common understanding of freedom. Most people think of freedom as the ability to choose between various options and to act without coercion (or at least overwhelming coercion or duress). Most would scoff (at least initially) at the suggestion that a choice could be free, even if so determined that the individual really only had the ability to choose one of the options. For example, we might say that I have the ability to freely order a pizza for dinner tonight. On most accounts, this would mean that I have the ability to either order a pizza or not order a pizza (and could really do either). Few persons (apart from professional philosophers and theologians of a certain stripe, or evolutionary biologists with a penchant for seeing all thoughts and actions as caused by genes) would say that my choice to order a pizza is the result of a chain of causes that may be traced

what God logically decreed first, second, and so on to happen." John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 532.

64. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 136.

to the creation of the universe or that my choice is the manifestation of a personality trait that I was born with such that I may be spoken of as having the property, *orders a pizza on August 10, 2015*. Even if such claims are made, most would deny that the choice was genuinely free.

Second, the libertarian view accords well with our lived experiences. Returning to my example of ordering a pizza, it seems that I really do have the ability to choose between ordering and not ordering, and if I order, it still seems that I could have chosen to not order, and vice versa. Many would find odd the claim that my inborn desires (or desires that follow deterministically from the way I was created and the experiences I have had) determined my choice to order the pizza on this particular occasion, but did not determine my choice to order pizza on another, similar occasion, and instead determined my choice to not order a pizza.

One of the most compelling arguments for libertarian freedom has to do with moral responsibility. Most proponents of libertarianism argue that their view of freedom allows for a greater degree of moral responsibility for human choice and action than compatibilism does.⁶⁵ A corollary to this is that it also lessens divine responsibility, while compatibilist freedom seems to increase God's responsibility for evil.

Some have also argued that a genuine loving relationship requires libertarian freedom. They claim that truly personal relationships require the ability to hurt one another. In most cases, arguments of this sort point to man's relationship with God, and contend that God's desire is for man to respond to his call with genuine and personal love, and that such responses cannot be caused by God, neither in his creating the individual's personality nor by overriding the individual's will. This argument proves compelling to many—love not given freely is no love at all. However, it is not obviously true and it seems that proof is not possible. Persons either agree with the requirement of libertarian freedom for love or they do not.

Yet, libertarianism is not without its critics. Perhaps the most common complaint against libertarian freedom is that it is incoherent or self-defeating because of its denial of efficient external causation for free decisions. That is, since proponents of libertarian freedom insist that free actions cannot be caused by anything external or internal to the individual, save an exercising of his will, those actions are seen to have no cause, and this seems preposterous! All actions must have a cause which can be noted when explaining the decision.⁶⁶ The only Uncaused Cause is God!⁶⁷ Grudem seems to advocate this critique: "Scripture nowhere says that we

65. Some libertarians have argued that compatibilism removes human responsibility and places blame for evil squarely on the shoulders of God, though most do not do so. What is really in mind here is a matter of degree. Libertarianism lessens the degree to which God is responsible for evil.

66. Many of the advocates of this criticism have referred to libertarian freedom as *contra-causal freedom*, a term not used by libertarians due to its erroneous characterization.

67. Of course, this argument makes use of the cosmological argument from causation.

are ‘free’ in the sense of being outside of God’s control or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything.”⁶⁸ Frame makes a similar allegation, equating libertarian choice with causeless choice: “Nor does Scripture indicate that God places any positive value on libertarian freedom (even granting that it exists). . . . One would imagine, then, that Scripture would abound with statements to the effect that causeless free actions by creatures are terribly important to God, that they bring him glory. But Scripture never suggests that God honors causeless choice in any way or even recognizes its existence.”⁶⁹

A different manifestation of the same argument is related to the likelihood of one choice over another, the nature of freedom, and the ability of the individual to make any choice whatsoever. According to this version of the argument, libertarian freedom, in its denial of personal preference as the efficient cause of the choice one makes, along with its insistence that the individual could choose either of two alternatives, creates a barrier to the individual’s ability to choose. Since both options must be viable alternatives, and the individual’s desires cannot be the *cause* of the choice, it is argued, then there cannot be any causal explanation for the choice, except the person *willing*. But on what basis can the person will one course of action over another? It seems that no answer can be given. If no cause can be given, then the choice must be arbitrary or irrational. If the individual uses rationality to choose, then it seems that the lack of reasons will preclude him from making any decision whatsoever! In any case, the result for libertarianism is disastrous—it either leads to inaction or irrationality.⁷⁰

These arguments are misguided because they wrongly assume that libertarian free choices require that, all things being equal, the person is completely indifferent. In fact, Wright refers to libertarian freedom as *liberty of indifference*, but this is not what most libertarians mean by free choice.⁷¹ I know of no proponent of libertarian freedom who claims that for a choice to be free, the individual must have no preference whatsoever. All libertarianism requires is that one’s preference does not preclude him from having the ability to choose the other option. Compatibilism argues that one’s preferences are determinative so that he does not have the ability to choose either of two options. While there may be some occasions where one really does not care, they are rare and are not the only instances

68. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 331.

69. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 140.

70. The well-known thought experiment concerning Buridan’s ass, who dies of starvation between two identical piles of hay, is representative. The concept is much older than the fourteenth-century French philosopher from whom it gets its name, and is still used in one form or another today. See, for example, R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

71. *Ibid.*, 44.

of free choice. They do show what is wrong with this criticism. Consider the following example: my wife suggests that we watch a movie, and offers two movies that I have seen, neither of which I wish to see again. Both are “chick-flicks”: *Howard’s End* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and are about the same length. I really do not care which we watch, but my wife wants my help, so I say, “*Howard’s End*.” She then indicates that she may prefer *Pride and Prejudice*, and so I say, “fine.” As best I can tell, I feel no resentment at our watching *Pride and Prejudice*, except that she asked my advice and then went another way; I really did not care which movie we watched. According to the critique, though, there really must have been something about me, such that I would prefer *Howard’s End*, and that is why I initially chose it. If I were really indifferent, we would still be trying to make a decision. But my reaction to the final choice of *Pride and Prejudice* speaks against this very argument; I did not care, but could still choose an option.

Other arguments against libertarianism have also been offered. Some have suggested that it tries to elevate man to the level of God or make man master over God. Similarly, some have suggested that libertarianism requires that man can thwart God’s decrees or plans. For example, Frame writes, “Scripture does not explicitly teach the existence of libertarian freedom. There is no passage that can be construed to mean that the human will is *independent of God’s plan* and of the rest of the human personality.”⁷² This, though, is not what libertarian freedom means either. Part of the problem, it seems, is that compatibilism is construed in terms of its compatibility with events being determined, while libertarianism is construed in terms of the ability of the individual. Some of the difficulty of the subject of human freedom may be clarified if libertarianism and compatibilism were spoken of in the same way; e.g., in terms of the origin of the individual’s choice. Libertarians argue that the choice one makes, if free, is determined by the individual himself without any external cause. Compatibilists, by contrast, argue that the free choices persons make are determined by the individual as he was made by God. That is, God made the person in such a way that he would have the desires he, in fact, has, and that he can only act in accordance with his desires. Libertarians argue that God made the person with a free will and that individual desires are not based in the way God made the individual. So, at the end of the day, what an individual will choose in any given situation, according to compatibilism, is tied back to God’s creating work. For libertarians this is not so, as we shall soon see.

The Nature of Divine Freedom

As should be clear from what has already been said, proponents of middle knowledge are committed to the view that God possesses libertarian freedom. In saying this, I mean to claim that there are choices God

72. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 140.

can make which could have been otherwise. For example, while God could not perform actions that are unholy, he could have created differently. This is not a particularly controversial claim, as most Calvinists allow that God is libertarianly free with respect to at least *some* choices, even if they fail to use this term. For example, Frame suggests that God could have *not-created* or could have *not-redeemed* humanity; to create and to redeem were free choices he made. While Frame attempts to distinguish God's freedom of choice here from libertarian freedom, he is unsuccessful. He attempts to make this distinction because he thinks libertarianism denies causation, but what he describes is essentially an exercising of libertarian choice: God could really choose between two mutually exclusive courses of action (i.e., create or not-create; redeem or not-redeem) and nothing external or internal to him, save his exercising of his will, causes the choice. Frame writes, "I would say that God's essential attributes and actions are *necessary*, but that his decrees and acts of creation, providence, and redemption are *free*. They are free, not merely in a compatibilist sense, nor at all in a libertarian sense, but in the sense that we know nothing in God's nature that constrains these acts or prevents their opposites."⁷³

Amazingly (given Frame's strong Calvinist stance), most Arminians (and thus, proponents of middle knowledge) agree with the basic point Frame hopes to make here—that God freely chooses how he will act with respect to creation, providence, and redemption. Nevertheless, they disagree with Frame's dismissal of libertarian freedom in God. They deem his characterization of libertarian freedom (as anarchist or illogical) erroneous. To be sure, Frame's attempt to create a third category of freedom certainly seems strange, since compatibilist and libertarian freedoms cover the range of meanings of freedom with regard to choice, and his description of the kind of freedom God enjoys is one that most proponents of libertarian freedom endorse.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have attempted to lay out some of the basic presuppositions held by proponents of middle knowledge. First, they hold to belief in meticulous divine providence, which is to say that all things happen within the purview of God's governance. Put differently, they can say that God is in control of all things, even down to the tiniest detail. Second, proponents of middle knowledge are careful to avoid overemphasizing one attribute to the detriment of the others. In saying this, what I was primarily concerned with noting is that they do not view omnipotence as a sort of "anything goes" with respect to divine power; there are still some things that God cannot do, but this does not diminish his power.

73. Ibid., 235–36.

The limitations on omnipotence we affirm are only those actions which it makes no sense to suppose God could perform. Third, I noted that much of the discussion surrounding middle knowledge has conceived of divine omniscience in terms of God's knowledge of an infinite number of statements (propositions). Last, I pointed out that proponents of middle knowledge believe in libertarian freedom, over against compatibilist freedom. This means that proponents of middle knowledge believe that creatures, when acting freely, have the ability to choose between competing alternatives and not merely the ability to choose in accordance with the desires they were created to have.

CHAPTER 1

THE DOCTRINE OF MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of middle knowledge was first articulated by Jesuit Counter-Reformation theologian Luis Molina in his massive *Concordia Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione, et Reprobatione, ad nonnullos primae partis D. Thome articulos* (henceforth, *Concordia*), a work originally meant to be a commentary on Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, but which wound up only addressing the relationship between human freedom and the efficaciousness of God's grace in salvation. The *Concordia* immediately drew criticism from the Dominicans, who feared it came dangerously close to Pelagianism—a fourth-century heresy which claimed that humans did not inherit a corrupt nature from Adam and could therefore earn salvation by their good works—because it maintained that God's grace was made efficacious by the free actions of individuals. This initial criticism grew into a full-fledged controversy within the Roman Catholic Church, and it occupied the thoughts and minds of many leaders for twenty-five years. Interestingly, the controversy was never fully resolved. Middle knowledge (sometimes called “Molinism” for Molina) was Molina's attempt to reconcile God's providence with human freedom.

MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE OR *SCIENTIA MEDIA*

The doctrine of middle knowledge is so called because it is thought to be *in the middle* of the traditional categories of divine thought, natural and free knowledge.¹ When it is said to be *in the middle* of God's natural and

1. These were Molina's terms for the epistemological categories handed down by Aquinas. Aquinas preferred the terms *Scientia Simplicis Intelligentia* (Simple Intelligence) and *Scientia Visionis* (Knowledge of Vision). See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.14.9; and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.66.4.

free knowledge, two things are meant. First, it has characteristics of both kinds of divine knowledge, similar to a cross between natural knowledge and free knowledge. Second, it comes in between natural and free knowledge in the *logical order* of God's thought *process* regarding creation (if such analogous language may be used of the mind of God). Before these concepts are fleshed out, a brief explanation of natural and free knowledge should be presented.

Natural knowledge refers to the truths God knows by his nature. Since his nature is necessary, He has knowledge of all necessary truths by knowledge of his own nature. Thomas Aquinas conceived of it as God's knowledge of all to which his power extends by virtue of his being Creator and being omniscient.² Note that Aquinas did not say that this knowledge comes from God's *creating* or his decision to *create*, but from his nature as the ground of all being.³ The basic point is this: God's knowledge of all necessary truths is located in his natural knowledge. Necessary truths are of two sorts: 1) metaphysically necessary truths, such as theological absolutes, mathematical formulae, or tautological statements, and 2) statements of possibility. Since the content of natural knowledge is itself necessary, natural knowledge can be described as that part of God's knowledge which could not have been different from what it is. It follows from this that it is independent of his will. Put differently, God has no control over the truth of propositions known by natural knowledge because they are necessarily true. As noted in the introduction, this is not to question his omnipotence or to go awry of good theology.⁴

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2. Aquinas writes, "But the power of anything can be perfectly known only by knowing to what its power extends. Since therefore the divine power extends to other things by the very fact that it is the first effecting cause of all things, as is clear from what we have said (Q. II, A. 3), God must necessarily know things other than Himself." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.14.5, trans. Laurence Shapcote, rev. Daniel J. Sullivan, in *Great Books of the Western World*. Vol. 17, *Aquinas* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), 79.
 3. Aquinas speaks of God's *proper* knowledge of discrete entities, which is to say that God knows things as they are distinct from one another as they have potentiality to exist if He were to create them.
 4. We noted that Christians have historically claimed that God cannot perform actions inconsistent with his nature, and it makes no sense to suppose even an omnipotent being could perform the logically impossible. Meaning and rationality depend on the laws of logic holding, and so for "omnipotence" to have any meaning, the laws must be binding. In addition to the laws of logic proper, we also noted that it makes no sense to suppose that God could make mathematical formulae false, since a change in meaning of the terms would be required. The same principles apply to tautological statements. A favorite example in the literature has been the statement, "All bachelors are unmarried." This statement is both obviously true and necessarily true. That is, it could not possibly be wrong because the definitions of the words simply make it true. A bachelor is, by definition, unmarried and there could not be a bachelor who is not unmarried (i.e., who is married). Once a man gets married, he ceases to be a bachelor. Thus, it is no deficiency in God's power for him to lack the ability to make the statement, "All bachelors are unmarried" false. It simply makes no sense to suppose it could be made false.

Free knowledge refers to the truths God knows by knowing his own will. It is his knowledge of those items, persons, or true propositions that he knows will exist because of his knowledge of what he intends to, or will, create. Thus, in one sense, free knowledge comes by his freely exercising his will in creating or controlling events within the created order. The content of this knowledge are truths that refer to what actually exists, existed, or will exist. Aquinas calls this *knowledge of vision* because he conceives of it as directly tied to God’s infinity and his observation of all events in eternity.⁵

Since free knowledge comes from God’s creative act of will (which is a free decision), it follows that the content of that knowledge is contingent. In other words, because God did not have to create what he did create, any true propositions dependent upon his choice about what to create are contingent (i.e., not necessary). For example, the proposition, “John Laing exists” is true only because God chose to create me. It is a contingent truth because my existence is not necessary. So free knowledge includes only metaphysically contingent truths, or truths that could have been prevented by God if he had chosen to create different situations, different creatures, or to not create at all. God knows the proposition in the example, “John Laing exists,” by his free knowledge.

Thus, it is by his free knowledge that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future. As Molina states, it is by his free knowledge that he knows “absolutely and determinately, *without any condition or hypothesis*, which ones from among all the contingent states of affairs were in fact going to obtain and, likewise, which ones were not going to obtain.”⁶ So free knowledge can be described as both contingent and dependent upon or posterior to, God’s will. Flint has set forth the double distinction in divine knowledge in graph format:

	<i>Natural Knowledge</i>	<i>Free Knowledge</i>
Truths		
known are:	(1) Necessary	(1) Contingent
	(2) Independent of God’s free will	(2) Dependent on God’s free will ⁷

5. Aquinas writes, “Now a certain difference is to be noted in the consideration of those things that are not actual. For though some of them may not be in act now, still they were, or they will be, and God is said to know all these with the knowledge of vision; for since God’s act of understanding, which is His being, is measured by eternity, and since eternity is without succession, comprehending all time, the present glance of God extends over all time, and to all things which exist in any time, as to subjects present to Him.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.14.9 (trans. Shapcote, 83).

6. Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 52.9, p. 168.

7. Thomas P. Flint, “Two Accounts of Providence,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays on the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 157.

To these two distinctions in divine knowledge, Molina added a third, which incorporated facets of each: *scientia media*, or middle knowledge. Middle knowledge is similar to natural knowledge in that it is prevolitional (prior to God's choice to create) and therefore its truth is independent of God's determining will. It is similar to free knowledge in that the truths that are known are contingent (in this case, dependent on creaturely will). Again, following Flint, the distinctions in divine knowledge can be represented graphically:

	<i>Natural Knowledge</i>	<i>Middle Knowledge</i>	<i>Free Knowledge</i>
Truths known are:	(1) Necessary (2) Independent of God's free will	(1) Contingent (2) Independent of God's free will	(1) Contingent (2) Dependent on God's free will ⁸

The doctrine of middle knowledge proposes that God has knowledge not only of metaphysically necessary truths via natural knowledge, and of truths expressing what He intends to do via free knowledge, but also a third class of propositions which have characteristics of each. The truths known by natural and middle knowledge inform God's decision regarding what he will create by limiting the sorts of worlds he can create (or actualize). Thus, middle knowledge is characterized as *God's prevolitional knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom*. In order to unpack this mouthful, an examination of counterfactuals needs to be undertaken.

COUNTERFACTUALS

A number of years ago, I attended a high school reunion. It was good to see many of my old buddies from high school, most of whom I had not seen in years. It was interesting to see how our lives had turned out; there were not a few surprises, as is often the case with these sorts of meetings (at my ten-year high school reunion, I won the "Most Changed" award). As we visited, the conversation inevitably turned to our antics while in high school, reminiscing on some of the more humorous events. The conversation also included discussion about the people we used to hang out with, including those we used to date. I began to wonder what happened to my first serious girlfriend, who I will call Susan.

Susan and I dated during my senior year in high school. We were somewhat of an odd couple; she was one of the more outspoken Christians at our school, while I was a self-proclaimed and rather vocal atheist. Despite these differences, we grew very close, but a long-term relationship was not to be. When I graduated, I left for Army Basic Training and knew

8. *Ibid.*, 158.

I would have to subsequently move to another state where my father's job had transferred. We talked about long-term possibilities, but while I was at Fort Knox, Susan broke off contact and refused to see me when I returned. She had good reason for breaking up with me, as our relationship violated the dictum against being unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14), and thus compromised her commitment to Christ. It was heart-wrenching for me at the time, and I fell into a depression for several months.

It was during this time that I came to saving faith in Jesus Christ. I had attended chapel services while in Basic, and when I moved out to Kansas to attend Kansas University, I encountered an energetic group of young people who loved the Lord. I attended their weekly Bible study and worship, and even bought my own Bible. However, I still did not believe. In a somewhat strange event, I remember praying to God, "Lord, if you exist, help me to believe in you and have faith." I never accepted Jesus during one of their Bible studies or worship services and I eventually broke with the group over a doctrinal issue. Yet I continued to read my Bible, pray and seek God, and faith came. I cannot point to a moment when that faith came (only God truly knows), but it was sometime between May and August 1988, by which time I was a convinced believer.

The discussions with my old high school buddies about the past got me thinking. Such reminiscences, especially with regard to past relationships, naturally lead to thoughts about how our lives have turned out and about how they may have been different. I could not help but wonder what my life would be like if Susan had not broken off contact with me, or if we had married. Would I still be a professor of theology and philosophy at a Southern Baptist seminary? Would I still be a Chaplain in the Army? Would I even be a Christian? None of the answers to these questions are clear or obvious. It may very well be that her breaking up with me at that point in my life was what I needed to come to faith in Christ; then again, perhaps not. I have often thought it was one of the key factors in breaking down my pride so that I might be humble before God, but this does not mean it was *necessary*. Who knows if it was (necessary)? Can such things be known, even by an all-knowing, all-seeing God? The answer to this last question has been the basis of much heated debate in Christian philosophical circles in recent years, as we will see in the next two chapters.

The idea that my life would have turned out a particular way if things had gone differently with Susan is dependent upon belief in what philosophers loosely refer to as "counterfactuals." As the term is used in the literature, a counterfactual is a statement of how things *would definitely* be if things had gone differently. It seems that most people intuitively believe that counterfactuals can be true, that there are some true statements about how things would have been if other things had gone differently from how they did go. Some counterfactuals seem obviously true, such as the following:

If I had married Susan, my daughter Sydney would not have been born.

Since Sydney is a product of my wife Stefana and me, she could not have been the product of my marriage to Susan.⁹ Any time we wonder about how things would have turned out differently if some other event had gone differently, we show that we believe in counterfactuals.

There are many types of counterfactuals, but those that are most relevant for our discussion are counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. These are statements about how someone would freely act if things were different. So, for example, the statement

If Susan had continued dating John, he would . . . today;

describes what I would be doing today if I had remained in the dating relationship with Susan. The idea behind this is that many free actions are performed in response to prior circumstances, and when those circumstances do not obtain, there is still a truth about what the individual would have done. Yet counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are not limited to descriptions of events that never occur. Philosophers who discuss these issues commonly refer to all propositions of the form, “If . . . then . . .” as counterfactuals, even if the events described did actually happen. For example, the statement, “If John were to ask Stefana to marry him, she would freely accept” is described as a counterfactual which is true in the actual world. This terminology can be a bit confusing, since the statement is not counter to the facts, but it has become standard in the literature. The idea behind it is this: before God created, there was no actual world, so all if-then statements were counterfactuals *at that time*.¹⁰

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9. Some may wish to suggest that we cannot know if this statement is true because, technically speaking, Sydney could still have been born if I had married Susan. After all, I could have had an affair with Stefana, or Susan may have passed away early, leaving me a widower and I could have then met Stefana and been married. However, the basic point of what I was trying to communicate is true, even if the counterfactual needs to be written more precisely. For example, we could write a counterfactual which communicates the same idea as follows:

If I had never met my wife, Stefana, my daughter Sydney would not have been born.

This counterfactual seems not only plausible, but obviously true. While it could still conceivably be false, the point that some counterfactuals can be true still stands. Some perceptive (or nit-picky) readers may still suggest that Sydney could have been born. If I had made a deposit at a sperm bank and Stefana had been inseminated with that deposit, Sydney could have been born. Pushing possible scenarios to the ridiculous, though, does not count against the assertion that counterfactuals can be true, at least at first glance. A counterfactual could be written which discounts all contact between my seed and Stefana’s egg and this would preclude the possibility of Sydney’s birth.

10. Many of the writers in the area have expressed frustration over the term *counterfactual*, since it is sometimes used in reference to events that are actualized. Kvanvig calls it “misleading” since God uses counterfactuals to bring about the actual world. Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 124. Freddoso tries to address the

The contemporary discussion of middle knowledge includes a number of interesting, though somewhat dense principles/ideas. Perhaps the most profitable has been the use of possible worlds semantics in evaluating the truth claims of various counterfactuals. It is to this topic that we now turn.

POSSIBLE WORLDS SEMANTICS

“What if you could travel to parallel worlds, the same year, the same Earth, only different dimensions—a world where the Russians rule America, or where your dreams of becoming a superstar came true, or where San Francisco was a maximum-security prison? My friends and I found the gateway. Now the problem is, finding a way back home.” Such were the words used to introduce one of my favorite television shows when I was growing up, *Sliders*. (For the record, I now see it as a bit cheesy, but an interesting concept nonetheless.) It was about four people who are sucked into a wormhole that leads to a parallel universe. They have a portable device for opening such passageways, but can neither control the time it opens nor the destination to which it leads, so they move from one *Earth* to the next (*sliding*), hoping one day to return to their own reality. On each parallel Earth, they discover how things are different from their own world (or their own histories). Sometimes things are vastly different, as in one episode where virtually all humans were extinct, while other times, things are quite similar. Yet, at its most basic, *Sliders* assumes that things *could* have been different from the way they in fact are—that events did not have to occur exactly as they did, or that people could have done things differently.

This assumption seems obvious to most people, and can be described as an existential quantification; it is based on one’s experiences. For example, today I left my mobile phone at home, but it seems quite clear that things could have been different (e.g., I could have put it in my pocket and brought it to work). Most persons would not require a proof that I could have done so, but just believe it, probably based on their own, similar experiences. Likewise, most of us do not see ourselves as necessary. While we would all like to think we are important and contribute something of value to the world and mankind, we readily acknowledge that the world would still *exist* (and probably get along just fine) if we had never been born. We take this to be the case from our knowledge of our spheres of influence and from observation of how things progress when

problem by preserving the distinction made by Molina between *conditional future contingents*, *absolute future contingents*, and *conditioned future contingents*. Alfred J. Freddoso, “Introduction,” in Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 22. Lewis also recognizes the difficulty with the term because some are in fact true, but notes that he cannot find another term which conveys what he wishes—*counterfactual* may be too narrow because it seems to exclude constructions with true antecedents, but *subjunctive conditionals* is too broad because it includes futurable statements that are not under consideration. David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 3–4.

we are absent from our normal processes (e.g., when we are out sick from work). Of course, we could also reason to the same conclusion through rational thought/argumentation. For example, most theists believe that God is the only necessary being and that he is self-sufficient. Those two beliefs combine to imply that we are not needed for God's well-being; we are contingent. Thus, most of us readily acknowledge that things could have been different. What is not so obvious, but has become somewhat standard language in modern modal logic and in discussions surrounding the doctrine of middle knowledge, is that such belief (that things could have been different) is belief in *possible worlds*.

While in the show *Sliders*, the alternate possible worlds really do exist (put more formally, they have *ontos*, or being) as separate versions of planet Earth with their own histories and geological developments, etc., this is not necessary for the popular possible-worlds-analysis of truth.¹¹ Rather, the concept of possible worlds can be used as a way of referring to different possibilities and for evaluating their likelihood. A possible world is best understood as a complete set of possible states of affairs, where a state of affairs is a description of any particular situation. For example, *John Laing's writing a book on middle knowledge* is a possible state of affairs that is included in the actual world. Similarly, the state of affairs, *John Laing's never writing a book on middle knowledge* is a possible state of affairs that is not included in the actual world, but is included in some possible worlds.

As already noted, most persons would affirm that there are many ways things could have been different; in fact, there appears to be a virtually infinite number of ways things could have been different, from something as simple as my remembering my mobile phone this morning, to more complex issues like the color of the sky or perhaps even the laws of physics.¹²

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11. David Lewis, the most prolific author related to the subject, argues that it does, but many philosophers have disputed this claim. According to Lewis, belief that everything is not necessarily so is in actuality the belief that "there exist many entities of a certain description, to wit 'ways things could have been.'" Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 84. If this assertion is taken at face value, then it can be concluded that anyone who asserts that things could have been different, believes in the existence of entities that might be called *ways things could have been* (or possible worlds). Lewis argues that those who do not wish to take the claim at face value deny it because their presuppositions do not allow for possible worlds: "I do not know of any successful argument that my realism about possible worlds leads to trouble, unless you beg the question by saying that it already *is* trouble." *Ibid.* By contrast, Kripke has argued for what he calls a stipulative account of possible worlds, seeing them as more than mere sets of propositions, but less than ontological entities; as purely formal items for consideration. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). Robert Adams, Alvin Plantinga, William Lycan, and Peter Forrest see possible worlds as merely a complete description of the way things could be. For the purposes of our discussion, we will follow this view.
 12. Throughout this chapter, I refer to a virtual infinity regarding the possibilities for the world. Some may wonder why such language is used. After all, the possibilities are either infinite or not. The idea, though, is that there are so many ways things could be different so as to seem infinite even though in actuality, there is, indeed, a finite number of possibilities. One need

As Lewis notes, the set of worlds considered possible is, at least to some extent, relative to one's own opinions about possibility.¹³ This is not to say that which worlds are possible is wholly relative, but rather our understanding of which worlds are possible is relative. A lot of thought about possible worlds is derived from individual philosophical opinions regarding how things *could* have been different. It makes sense to believe in the existence of a world where my truck is blue rather than black, or where I weigh three hundred pounds rather than (approximately) 180 pounds, but it does not make sense to believe in the existence of a world where those items deemed *necessary truths* are different.¹⁴ Since the doctrine of middle knowledge proposes that God has knowledge of all possible truths, the modern version of Molinism speaks of God's knowledge of all possible worlds.

There is much technical philosophical jargon and discussion surrounding the possible worlds analysis of truth and many a student has been lost in the nuances of terminology. However, at its most basic, it really only has to do with the nature of possibility and what could have been the case. We will try to present the basic ideas in the philosophical discussion in the following pages, though a complete understanding of the technical arguments is not necessary in order to understand the basic theory of middle knowledge.

Actualization of Worlds

One of the distinctive features of Molinism which makes it such a powerful approach to understanding the relationship between divine providence and human freedom is the claim that God has knowledge of not only all possible worlds, but also of how all possible free creatures would in fact act in all possible circumstances, and that this knowledge is logically prior to and therefore informs, his creative decision. However, it has become common in the philosophical literature on the subject to refer to God's

only consider all the possible arrangements of currently existing molecules to get an idea of what is meant—it seems that there is an infinite number of ways the molecules could be arranged before we even consider changing the molecules themselves, or adding new molecules or subtracting molecules. For each arrangement, there is a possible world. However, while this *seems* to allow for an infinite number of possible worlds, in reality there is a finite number of arrangements. The possibilities are also finite because they are composed of finite items. Put differently, anything composed of finite items must be finite, and therefore, the universe and possibilities of universes, are finite. Conversely, anything infinite cannot be composed of finite items (or attributes).

13. Lewis writes, "For instance, I believe that there are worlds where physics is different from the physics of our world, but none where logic and arithmetic are different from the logic and arithmetic of our world. This is nothing but the systematic expression of my naive, pre-philosophical opinion that physics could be different, but not logic or arithmetic." Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 88.
14. It is interesting to note that Plantinga has defined necessary truths as those laws or propositions which are true in all possible worlds. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 55.

providential activity as *actualizing* states of affairs, rather than *creating worlds*.¹⁵

This actualizing activity needs further clarification, though, for it is hard to understand how God can actualize worlds where people do what he wishes without impinging on their freedom. Put differently, it is not altogether clear that God can actualize the free actions of creatures.¹⁶ For example, consider the following state of affairs:

John Laing's ordering a pepperoni pizza tonight.

Surely God, being omnipotent, can actualize this state of affairs (or cause it to obtain). He could force me to pick up the phone, dial the number for Papa John's Pizza, and say, "I would like to order a pepperoni pizza," by overriding my decision-making processes. This would clearly not be a libertarianly free action. There are, however, other ways of understanding God's activity in bringing about my ordering a pepperoni pizza which do not violate my freedom. In an effort to explain this, some philosophers have drawn a distinction between two kinds of actualizing activity: strong and weak actualization.¹⁷

Strong actualization was represented in the example above, where God actively caused me to call Papa John's Pizza and order a pepperoni pizza.¹⁸ By contrast, weak actualization refers to the bringing about of an event by means of the free actions of another.¹⁹ This concept can be illustrated by

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15. It is too simplistic and technically incorrect to assert that God creates a world where his will is achieved through the free decisions of creatures. It is seen as semantically improper to say that God created the world because, it must be remembered, that the *world* (in the sense used), is not an object which had a beginning, but rather one of many complete sets of compatible states of affairs which have subsisted in the mind of God for all eternity. Plantinga explains, "We speak of God as *creating* the world; yet if it is a of which we speak, what we say is false. For a thing is created only if there is a time before which it does not exist; and this is patently false of *a*, as it is of any state of affairs. What God has created are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; he has not created himself, or numbers, propositions, properties, or states of affairs: these have no beginnings. We can say, however, that God *actualizes* states of affairs; his creative activity results in their being or becoming actual." *Ibid.*, 169.
 16. The basic concept of freedom presumed here is that agent acts freely when there is nothing external to that agent which constitutes a determining factor in that action's performance.
 17. See Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 172–73; and Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1976), 67–69.
 18. Flint and Freddoso offer a definition of strong actualization: "Roughly, an agent *S* strongly actualizes a state of affairs *p* just when *S* causally determines *p*'s obtaining, i.e., just when *S* does something which in conjunction with other operative causal factors constitutes a sufficient causal condition for *p*'s obtaining." Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 139.
 19. Flint and Freddoso explain, "In such cases the agent in question, by his actions or omissions, strongly brings it about that another agent *S* is in situation *C*, where it is true that if *S* were in *C*, then *S* would freely act in a specified way." *Ibid.*, 140.

an appeal to counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Suppose the following counterfactual of freedom is true:

If Pizza Hut had a sale on its Big New Yorker pepperoni pizza for \$5 each and John Laing was aware of it, then he would order one (even if he had just eaten dinner).²⁰

Armed with this knowledge, God could weakly actualize my ordering a pepperoni pizza tonight by placing me in a situation in which I become aware of the sale.²¹ For example, God may cause (strongly actualize) me to drive down a particular road that has a billboard advertising the Big New Yorker sale, or he may cause me to change the channel on my television to a station that is currently airing a commercial for the Pizza Hut promotion. In both cases, God will have strongly actualized a state of affairs he knows will lead to my free decision to order a pepperoni pizza. Thus, God can weakly actualize my ordering a pepperoni pizza without compromising my freedom, at least not with respect to the decision to order the pizza. Of course, these examples are a bit simplistic, for God could use a string of weak actualizations to bring about my ordering a Big New Yorker. That is, it may be possible for God to orchestrate events so that I freely order the pizza without any violations of anyone's freedom.

It should be clear that the distinction of strong and weak actualization is a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between divine providence and human freedom. However, under the Molinist system, there are limitations to the states of affairs God can actualize. For example, God cannot strongly actualize counterfactuals of freedom because the strong actualization destroys the freedom of the actor. God is also limited in the states of affairs he can weakly actualize due to the true counterfactuals of freedom.

Suppose the counterfactual mentioned earlier is true. Suppose that I would order a Big New Yorker pizza if Pizza Hut sold them for \$5. In that case, God could bring it about that I freely order one, but he could not bring it about that I freely refrain from ordering one while being aware of the sale.²² Similarly, if the counterfactual were false, then God could not weakly

20. I am painfully aware that Pizza Hut no longer offers the Big New Yorker pizza in most (if any) markets.

21. Of course, there is no guarantee that such a sale will in fact take place. I have assumed that it does in my example, but even so, there is nothing which precludes God from actualizing (either strongly or weakly) the state of affairs, *Pizza Hut's placing the Big New Yorker pepperoni pizza on sale for \$5*.

22. In the philosophical language, God can weakly actualize the corresponding state of affairs,

John Laing's being aware of Pizza Hut's sale on the Big New Yorker pepperoni pizza for \$5 each and (freely) ordering one;

but he cannot weakly actualize its opposite, namely

actualize my being aware of the sale and freely ordering a pizza, but he could weakly actualize my being aware of the sale and freely refraining from ordering one. Note that this does not mean that God cannot strongly actualize either state of affairs; he could always override my freedom to force me to order or not order, but then those would be different states of affairs (since my freedom is included in the states of affairs mentioned). It follows from this that since possible worlds are combinations (or sets) of states of affairs, and some states of affairs are unactualizable (or infeasible) for God, then God is limited in terms of which worlds he is able to bring about. In order to help clarify this notion, it has been suggested that possible worlds be organized according to the counterfactuals that are true in them.

Feasibility of Possible Worlds, Creaturely World-Types, and Galaxies

In order to understand how possible worlds may be organized for purposes of examination, several notions require explanation. The first has already been alluded to, and is feasibility. While there is a virtually infinite number of possible worlds, all are not feasible for God to actualize; they are not live options because of the true counterfactuals. For example, if it is true that I would order one pizza from Papa John's if I were aware of a sale, then all possible worlds in which I would not order a pizza or in which I would order more than one pizza if aware of the sale are not feasible. They are logically possible (there is nothing about my ordering two pizzas, for instance, which violates the fundamental laws of logic), but not real options. As we might imagine, there will be a great number of possible worlds that are not feasible. This concept will become more clear as we examine the other two notions.

Thinking about worlds in this way leads to the second notion that needs explanation: creaturely world-types. A creaturely world-type is a complete set of counterfactuals. It includes all compatible truths, including all compatible counterfactuals of freedom. There are many circumstances that any given individual could find himself in, and for each set of circumstances, there is a virtually infinite number of corresponding counterfactuals which are mutually exclusive. Sticking to the example of the pizza sale, consider the state of affairs, *John's seeing a commercial for Papa John's veggie lovers pizza on sale for \$5*. On the surface, it may seem that there are only two counterfactual possibilities: that I either order one, or I do not.²³ In one sense, this is true, for it seems that I must do one or the

John Laing's being aware of Pizza Hut's sale on the Big New Yorker pepperoni pizza for \$5 each and (freely) refraining from ordering one.

23. These two possibilities can be represented by the counterfactuals:

If John were to see a commercial for Papa John's veggie lovers pizza on sale for \$5, he would not order one

and

other. However, the counterfactual which states that I will not order one can actually be viewed as representative of a set of counterfactuals of freedom with different consequents. For example, it could include situations where I would not order a pizza at all and instead eat something else (a hamburger, a steak, a PB&J sandwich, etc.) or eat nothing at all, or it could include situations in which I order more than one veggie lovers pizza (two, three, four, etc.). So, for any possible circumstance a free creature may find himself in, there is a virtually infinite number of possible actions he may take which correspond to a virtually infinite number of counterfactuals of freedom. A creaturely world-type will include one counterfactual for each set of circumstances, and for every possible combination of counterfactuals, there is a creaturely world-type described by (or composed of) it. While there will be a virtually infinite number of creaturely world-types, only one will be true (the one which is comprised of the true counterfactuals), and therefore, only possible worlds of that world-type are feasible. Flint explains (assuming T is the true creaturely world-type):

But God has no control whatsoever over the truth of T ; there is no complete creative action God has the power to perform such that, were he to perform it, T would not be true. From this it follows that God has no control over the fact that some T -world is actual. . . . So there are many possible worlds which, given his middle knowledge, God knows he is not in a position to actualize.²⁴

This may appear to be a serious deficiency of middle knowledge because it unsatisfactorily limits God's power, but this is not entirely accurate, for each creaturely world-type includes a virtually infinite number of possible worlds. This is due to the fact that the circumstances described by the counterfactuals may or may not be actualized in any given possible world. In other words, you could have many possible worlds which share counterfactuals but which differ with respect to a whole host of factors—who exists, how things are arranged, which situations/circumstances actually obtain, etc. So there really is a virtual infinite number of possible worlds that are feasible for God to actualize, even given the constraints due to the true counterfactuals. This leads to the third notion in organizing possible worlds: galaxies.

The term "galaxy" is used in the philosophical literature to refer to the set of possible worlds in which a particular creaturely world-type holds. So for every world-type (T_n), there exists a corresponding galaxy (G_n) of possible worlds in which the counterfactuals of that world-type are true. Following Flint, we may say that Galaxy 1 (G_1) is comprised of the set of worlds

If John were to see a commercial for Papa John's veggie lovers pizza on sale for \$5, he would order one.

24. Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 51.

in which World-Type 1 (*T1*) holds, the set of worlds in which World Type 2 (*T2*) holds makes up Galaxy 2 (*G2*), and so forth.²⁵ If *T1* is the true creaturely world-type, then it follows that all the worlds in *G1* are viable options for actualization by God. It also follows that every other creaturely world-type includes at least one false counterfactual, and therefore the galaxies in which those world types hold must be deemed infeasible.²⁶

According to the theory of middle knowledge, God comprehends all possible worlds by means of his natural knowledge. He then combines this with his middle knowledge, by which he knows which creaturely world-type is true and thereby knows which galaxy (or which possible worlds) is feasible for him to actualize. It is at this point that God, by means of his free knowledge, or his knowledge of his own will, comes to decide and know which world will be actual, and which worlds would have been actual. The combination of these three logical moments in the pre-creative knowledge of God affords him complete knowledge of the future while maintaining a significant amount of creaturely freedom. It must be admitted that this way of speaking appears both speculative and confusing to most, save professional philosophers. Fortunately, a complete grasp of the ideas of creaturely world-types and galaxies is not essential for a basic

25. Ibid. Zagzebski essentially means the same thing when she speaks of galaxies—it is a set of possible worlds which are compatible at some level with each other. She writes, “So for each world-germ God might have created, there is a set of possible worlds compatible with that world-germ. Let us call each such set of worlds a galaxy. . . . So galaxy 1 is the set of worlds compatible with world-germ 1, galaxy 2 is the set of worlds compatible with world-germ 2, and so forth.” Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 129–30. It must be noted, though, that Zagzebski’s *world-germ* should not be equated with the concept of *creaturely world-type* described above; they are not the same. A world-germ is a more vague notion. It is described by Zagzebski as the foundations of a world, which may be compatible with a host of possible worlds. Included in a world-germ are things like laws, substances, and even results of direct action by God on those substances, whereas a creaturely world-type is strictly made up of (described by) counterfactuals.

Interestingly, Flint speaks of creaturely world-types being true relative to the worlds they describe (or relative to the galaxy of worlds they describe). This is misleading since it has already been asserted that only one creaturely world-type is true. Thus, I have chosen to use the term “holds” to communicate the relative (indexical) nature of the truth of creaturely world-types in relation to the worlds described by them.

26. This may seem to be too deterministic or even impious because of the severe limitations placed on God’s creative options. However, two points are in order. First, it must be remembered that each galaxy is comprised of a virtually infinite number of possible worlds. It is wrong to think of God as having an extremely limited selection in reference to the kind of world he can actualize. In the example above, *G1* includes a great diversity of worlds that God can choose from. Second, it must also be remembered that the feasibility of worlds and galaxies is dependent on which counterfactuals are true, and that this is contingent. Flint writes, “Even if *T1* is the true world-type, it need not have been, for the counterfactuals which constitute it are only contingently true. *T2* or *T3* or any other creaturely world-type might have been true instead. And, of course, had any of them been true, then the worlds in *G1*, which we are assuming to be in fact feasible, would not have been feasible. Feasibility, then, is a contingent feature of a world or of a galaxy.” Flint, *Divine Providence*, 53.

understanding of middle knowledge (though it is if one is going to wade into the deeper waters of the current debates surrounding truth values of counterfactuals).

Comparative Similarity among Possible Worlds

One of the more controversial aspects of the contemporary discussion of Molinism has been the use of possible worlds in determining the truth of counterfactuals. Robert Stalnaker has suggested that the concept of a possible world can be useful in making the transition from belief conditions to truth conditions for evaluating counterfactuals.²⁷ He argues that a counterfactual is true in the actual world if and only if it is true in the possible world that is most similar to the actual world.²⁸ This concept is important for some ways of answering the most common objection to middle knowledge, as will be shown in chapter 2.

Implicit in this assertion is that there is an ordering of possible worlds based on their resemblance to the actual world. Stalnaker notes that it is difficult to determine what the most similar possible world will look like, but asserts that it will only include differences from the actual world that are “required, implicitly or explicitly, by the antecedent.”²⁹ The changes or differences allowed, then, must be such that “the least violence to the correct description and explanation of the actual world” is tolerated.³⁰ He admits that these are vague notions and that more work needs to be done in this pragmatic area.

Lewis agrees that the whole idea of comparative similarity of possible worlds to the actual world is vague. This is due in part to the fact that the similarity relation depends on which criteria are used for comparison and how weights are assigned to the (almost innumerable) criteria. Yet, Lewis argues, this is no different than any attempt at comparative similarity. He uses the comparison of two cities to a third as an example. Which of the first two is *more* similar to the third depends on which characteristics the individual making the comparison decides to use (landscape, architecture, industry, political climate, population, etc.). This problem does not prevent similarity comparisons from being made because, Lewis

27. Stalnaker begins his discussion by explicating the various ways individuals determine whether they believe a counterfactual to be true or not. He concludes that belief in the truth of a counterfactual is directly correlated to one's understanding of how the truth of that counterfactual will fit with his/her beliefs about the world. He writes, “First, add the antecedent (hypothetically) to your stock of beliefs; second, make whatever adjustments are required to maintain consistency (without modifying the hypothetical belief in the antecedent); finally, consider whether or not the consequent is then true.” Robert C. Stalnaker, “A Theory of Conditionals,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1968): 102.

28. He writes, “Consider a possible world in which *A* is true, and which otherwise differs minimally from the actual world. *If A then B* is true (false) just in case *B* is true (false) in that possible world.” *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 104.

30. *Ibid.*

contends, we have a basic conception of what similarity means. He writes, “Somehow, we *do* have a familiar notion of comparative overall similarity, even of comparative similarity of big, complicated, variegated things like whole people, whole cities, or even—I think—whole possible worlds. However mysterious that notion may be, if we can analyze counterfactuals by means of it we will be left with one mystery in place of two.”³¹

However, Lewis remains skeptical about arriving at a scientific means of comparing possible worlds (like, for example, a mathematical analysis where values are assigned to varying characteristics and weights added to the different types of characteristics).³² The interesting thing to note here is that this does not constitute an objection to the supposition that there *is* a closest possible world to the actual world, but only to the belief that we may determine which one it is, such that all rational persons agree. Plantinga has echoed this concern, noting that “we cannot as a rule *discover* the truth value of a counter-factual [*sic*] by asking whether its consequent holds in those worlds most similar to the actual in which its antecedent holds.”³³ Yet he moves beyond the subjective nature of comparative similarity to note a problem specific to comparing possible worlds, pointing out that “one measure of similarity between worlds involves the question whether they share their counterfactuals,” which we cannot know.³⁴ In fact, in some cases, shared counterfactuals may weigh more heavily than shared facts in determining similarity.

To illustrate this point, Plantinga offers an example in which he describes a near tragedy for rockclimber Royal Robbins. Robbins almost falls as he reaches Thanksgiving Ledge 2,500 feet up the mountain. However, he regains his composure and goes on to reach the top of the mountain. Plantinga asks us to consider the following counterfactual:

If Robbins had slipped and fallen at Thanksgiving Ledge, he would have been killed.³⁵

Although this proposition may seem obviously true, Plantinga notes that it can be false in a world that is more similar to the actual world [α] in terms

31. Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 92. Plantinga agrees: “We do seem to have an intuitive grasp of this notion—the notion of similarity between states of affairs.” Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 174–75.

32. He writes, “We must resist the temptation. The exact measure thus defined cannot be expected to correspond well to our own opinions about comparative similarity. Some of the similarities and differences most important to us involve idiosyncratic, subtle, *Gestalt* properties. . . . The same goes, I fear, for any humanly possible attempt at a precise definition of comparative similarity of worlds. Not only would we go wrong by giving a precise analysis of an imprecise concept; our precise concept would not fall within—or even near—the permissible range of variations of the ordinary concept.” Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 95.

33. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 178.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

of particular facts than another world in which it is true. An extended quote may be helpful:

Now what happens in the closest worlds in which he falls?³⁶ Well, there is at least one of these—call it *W/*—in which he falls at *t* just as he is reaching the Ledge; at the next moment *t+1* (as close as you please to *t*) he shows up exactly where is in *α* at *t+1*; and everything else goes just as it does in *α*. Would *W/* not be more similar to the actual world than any in which he hurtles down to the Valley floor, thus depriving American rockclimbing of its most eloquent spokesman?³⁷

Plantinga goes on to note that if *W/* is most similar to *α*, then the counterfactual is false. However, the problem with the conclusion that *W/* is most similar to *α*, is that causal (or natural) laws were ignored.³⁸ *W/* clearly does not possess the same causal laws as *α*, whereas a world in which Robbins falls to the Valley floor does. Thus, it seems that *W/* is not very similar to *α*, at least with respect to natural laws. However, Plantinga is quick to point out that a salient feature of causal laws is that they *support* or *entail* counterfactuals. This leads him to conclude that we could just as easily reject *W/* as most similar on the basis that it lacks some of *α*'s counterfactuals (those supported or entailed by natural laws).

Not all contemporary Molinists have embraced the possible worlds analysis of counterfactuals. Alfred Freddoso, whose critical translation of the relevant sections of the *Concordia* has become the standard in the field, has argued that the connection between the antecedent and consequent of counterfactuals “is not reducible to any logical or, more important, causal connection.”³⁹ This is problematic for the Stalnaker hypothesis because it argues that “the truth-value of a subjunctive conditional *p* depends asymmetrically on the categorical (including causal) facts about the world at which *p* is being evaluated, so that until the full range of such categorical facts is in place, the truth-value of *p* is still indeterminate.”⁴⁰ This seems to lead to the conclusion that the determination of which world is actual is

36. It should be noted that Plantinga has already suggested that there may not be one *closest* world, but rather a family of closest worlds. Although he was working on this assumption, he would later abandon it, as our discussion will demonstrate. *Ibid.*, 175.

37. *Ibid.*, 177.

38. Plantinga writes, “The answer, or course, is that we are neglecting causal or natural *laws*. Our world *α* contains a number of these, and they are among its more impressive constituents. In particular, there are some implying (together with the relative antecedent conditions) that anyone who falls unroped and unprotected from a ledge 2500 feet up a verticle cliff, moves with increasing rapidity towards the centre of the earth, finally arriving with considerable impact at its surface. Evidently not all of these laws are present in *W/*, for the latter shares the relevant initial conditions with *α* but in it Robbins does not fall to the Valley floor—instead, after a brief feint in that direction, he reappears on the cliff.” *Ibid.*, 178.

39. Freddoso, “Introduction,” 74.

40. *Ibid.*

prior to which counterfactuals are true, but this is clearly unsatisfactory.⁴¹ Freddoso notes that if this is the case (which he does not seek to prove), then Molinists (who wish to hold on to possible worlds semantics) will have to modify the rules governing possible worlds. Ultimately, Freddoso believes the standard semantics for possible worlds is doomed to failure for other reasons as well and he rejects its use outright.⁴²

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have presented the doctrine of divine middle knowledge as it is distinguished from natural and free knowledge, and explained its usefulness in solving the dilemma of divine providence and human freedom. Middle knowledge is prevolitional like natural knowledge, but its content is contingent like the content of free knowledge. According to the theory, God knows how all possible people would freely act in all possible situations (counterfactuals of freedom) prior to any act of his will, and uses this knowledge to decide which world to actualize so his will is met. Last, I have delineated the salient features of the contemporary approach to Molinism, explaining how the possible worlds semantics and language of world actualization can be helpful in clarifying the doctrine and its contention that not all possible worlds can be created. I explained the use of the idea of comparative similarity among possible worlds and some of the problems associated with it.

Although Molinism can be a powerful tool in answering some of the toughest theological and philosophical problems associated with theistic belief, it is not without its contemporary detractors. An interesting point about the contemporary discussion is that, although the doctrine of middle knowledge was criticized in Molina's day for giving too much credence to human freedom, it has recently been criticized for coming too close to determinism. The major objections to the contemporary formulation will be considered in the next two chapters.

41. This objection was first proposed by Anthony Kenny and is the subject of chapter 3.

42. Freddoso writes, "There are, in any case, independent grounds for having doubts about the standard semantics, for example, its inability to accommodate the intuitively plausible belief that subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents may differ from one another in truth-value." Freddoso, "Introduction," 75. See also Alfred J. Freddoso, "Human Nature, Potency and the Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (1986): 43–45.