Luis de Molina, ON DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE: PART IV OF THE CONCORDIA, intro. and trans. Alfred J. Fredosso

William Hasker
reaction is rooted in experience, or rooted in the way a belief can be grounded in experience, or rooted in some other way. In a further commentary on the storm episode Phillips says that “the notion of God’s will is formed, not in a search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations.” When in such a storm situation one realizes there is an absence of anything to show why one should perish or not one comes to a sense of being at God’s mercy and, through it, to a sense of wonder at the contingency of life. In this way there is a “dying to the understanding.” Phillips goes on (pp. 283-89) to explore this “dying to the understanding” in a different setting, involving one’s relation to others. Here he uses to good effect the episode of Mrs. Turpin’s revelation, in Flannery O’Connor’s short story.

In these discussions we have Phillips consulting and describing aspects of religious life. Here he is doing the “looking” that Wittgenstein recommended, and the results are edifying. This is not to say that we should accept his descriptions as definitive or, indeed, any of his commentary, nor that we should reject it. Descriptions usually have a point and the point can skew them, and the lessons drawn from them can be off or just right. These are matters for reflection. But the substance of the descriptions remains as nourishment for philosophical reflection.


WILLIAM HASKER, Huntington College.

To refer to this volume as Freddoso’s “translation” of Molina is correct but woefully inadequate. Freddoso’s 81-page Introduction is not only a superb commentary on the late-medieval controversy over foreknowledge and middle knowledge; it is also a major philosophical work in its own right. My recommendation to the reader is that she begin by reading the first three sections of the Introduction (deferring sections 4 and 5) as rapidly as possible so as to provide orientation for the sixteenth-century controversy. Then, she should carefully work through the translation, finally returning for a leisurely re-reading of the entire Introduction for its original philosophical insights. In this review I shall comment briefly on the translation, and then more in detail on Freddoso’s Introduction.

In his preface, Freddoso notes that the has resisted the temptation to divide Molina’s very long sentences (a topic of complaint even in the sixteenth century!) into shorter ones, because “after several attempts at it, I become convinced that I could not do this without altering the sense of the original” (p. x). In spite of this, Freddoso has achieved a remarkable clarity in his
rendering; I do not recall a single sentence in the translation whose syntax and/or intent remained unclear to me. This is due in considerable part, to be sure, to the excellent notes, printed by Cornell at the foot of each page where they belong. These notes cover everything from explanations (and occasional corrections of inaccuracies) of Molina’s statements, to brief biographies of contemporary writers referred to, to explanations of doctrines Molina is refuting. This is not to say, of course, that no obscurities remain. But I think the reader can be confident that those which persist are due to genuine difficulties in Molina’s thought; to the extent that scholarly background and commentary can remove difficulties, Freddoso has done so.

The full title of the Concordia is The Compatibility of Free Choice with the Gifts of Grace, Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination and Reprobation. The entirety of Parts I-IV (there are seven Parts in all) is a "strikingly extensive commentary, divided into fifty-three disputations, on a single article from the First Part of St. Thomas’s Summa Theologiae, namely, question 14, article 13, ‘Whether God Has Knowledge of Future Contingents’" (p. x). Indeed, Molina’s regard for Thomas, “whom in all things I sincerely desire to have as a patron instead of an adversary” (p. 114), is the cause of some difficulties, in that Molina is most reluctant to indicate a disagreement with Thomas even when it is clear that one exists. Thus, it is very evident that Molina’s conception of divine eternity differs markedly from that of Thomas, yet Molina can never quite bring himself to acknowledge this.

Part IV, On Divine Foreknowledge, comprises Disputations 47 through 53. Disputation 47, “On the Source of Contingency,” contains a discussion of various forms of contingency, including the argument (which may be of interest to animal-rights advocates) that there is in brute beasts a “certain trace of freedom” and also of contingency in their movements. In Disputations 48 and 49 Molina considers and rejects the doctrine, usually attributed to Aquinas, that God knows future contingent things by his “direct vision” of them in eternity. In Disputations 50 and 51 Molina considers and rejects several other contemporary views of foreknowledge. Disputation 52 sets forth in detail Molina’s theory of scientia media or middle knowledge, and in Disputation 53 he deals with objectors, principally the Banezians. (Domingo Banez, Molina’s principal opponent, held that, in the case of all nonevil actions, God efficaciously moves the human agent to take the intended action. Molina, no doubt rightly, rejected this as a denial of human freedom.) The perusal of these Disputations should result not only in a better appreciation of Molina’s own views, but in an understanding of the controversial context of his debate, which in many respects is markedly different from our own. It cannot be unimportant, for instance, that Molina narrowly escaped condemnation because of his “excessive” concessions to free will, whereas a great
many philosophers today are suspicious of his view precisely because it comes too close to determinism.

In his Introduction Freddoso distinguishes the source-question about foreknowledge, "[W]hat is the source of and explanation for the fact that God knows future contingents with certainty?" from the reconciliation-question, "How is this divine foreknowledge to be reconciled with the contingency of what is known by it?" (p. 1). Freddoso, following Molina, holds that the source-question is answered through the theory of middle knowledge, which holds that God knows "conditional future contingents" (better known in recent literature as "counterfactuals of freedom") and that these, together with God's knowledge of his own causal contribution, enable God to know the actual future. And he also holds, unsurprisingly, that God's knowledge of the future is not incompatible with (a moderately strong libertarian conception of) human freedom. What cannot be conveyed in a brief review, however, is the care and insight embodied in Freddoso's definitions, analyses, and discussions of these points.

My own objections to these views are on record and will not be repeated here.¹ I do want to point out, however, that on at least two important matters Freddoso deviates from the positions usually held by those who otherwise share the views stated above. I believe, furthermore, that these deviations (I am tempted to call them defections) are significant enough that they ought to be a source of concern for those who have a stake in defending those views.

One such deviation concerns the way in which Freddoso arrives at his answer to the reconciliation-question. Probably the most popular solution for this problem (among those who, like Freddoso, hold that there is a solution) is the "Ockhamist" response in terms of "hard and soft facts": facts about God's past beliefs are "soft facts" about the past and thus, unlike "hard facts," may still be open to our control. Indeed, Freddoso himself has arguably been the best exponent of this solution.² But Freddoso has undergone a "conversion from Ockhamism to Molinism" (p. 61), and now holds, with Molina, that "God's past beliefs are just as necessary in the sense in question as are any other truths about the past," and that "If God knew from eternity that Peter would deny Christ at T, then no agent can now cause it to be true that God never knew this" (p. 58).

How then can foreknowledge and freedom be reconciled? The answer is best given in Molina's own words:

Even if (i) the conditional is necessary (because... these two things cannot both obtain, namely, that God foreknows something to be future and that the thing does not turn out that way), and even if (ii) the antecedent is necessary in the sense in question (because it is past-tense and because no shadow of
alteration can befall God), nonetheless the consequent can be purely contin­
gent (p. 189, quoted by Freddoso in the Introduction, p. 58).

Thus, even though God's eternal knowledge that Peter would deny Christ is
part of the immutable past, Peter's denial itself is "purely contingent" and is
"unqualifiedly able to obtain and able not to obtain" (pp. 189, 190). As
Freddoso well says, "at first glance [Molina's] response to the argument is
apt to strike one as astonishing" (p. 58). But he now accepts that response,
and in defense of it he brings forward the well-worn argument that God's
foreknowledge does not cause Peter's sin (though as Jonathan Edwards long
ago pointed out, foreknowledge can perfectly well show an action to be
necessary, even if it is not the foreknowledge that makes it necessary).

It should perhaps be said that this Molinist view is slightly less paradoxical
than it may at first seem. Freddoso and Molina do not deny the logical rule,
"If □ P. and □ (P ⊃ Q), then □ Q." In the inference which they reject, the
first premise (about God's past knowledge of Peter's sin) and the conclusion
(about Peter's sin itself) are not logically or metaphysically necessary; rather,
they are necessary in the way "hard facts" about the past are necessary—as
Freddoso says, "accidentally necessary." So Freddoso is not claiming that
logical and metaphysical necessity are not closed under entailment—that
would indeed be nonsense—but rather that accidental necessity is not so
closed. What he denies, then, is what are sometimes called "transfer of
necessity principles," or what I have elsewhere designated as "power entail­
ment principles." Nevertheless, at least one reader finds Freddoso's initial
incredulity at Molina's position far more persuasive than his eventual en­
dorsement of it.

The other deviation concerns the semantics of counterfactuals of freedom
(or, conditional future contingents). Ever since the reinvention of middle
knowledge by Alvin Plantinga, expositions of the theory have tended to rely
on the possible-worlds semantics for counterfactuals developed by Steinhaker,
Lewis and Pollock. The central idea of this semantics is, that a counterfactual
conditional is true if its antecedent and consequent are both true in some
world which is more similar to the actual world than any in which the ante­
cedent is true and the consequent false. This semantics, as many students of
counterfactuals will agree, is remarkably helpful both in enabling one to grasp
in a general way the truth-conditions for counterfactuals, and in helping one
to appreciate the validity or invalidity of particular argument-forms.

Freddoso, however, has come to recognize that there is a crucial flaw in
this semantics from the standpoint of middle knowledge. The guiding idea of
the possible-worlds semantics is that the truth of counterfactuals is deter­
mined by the similarity of various possible worlds in non-counterfactual
respects; more idiomatically, truths about "what would be the case...if" de­
pend on truths about what is in fact the case. The theory of middle knowledge,
on the other hand, requires that the truth-values of the counterfactuals are not dependent on other, non-counterfactual truths about the worlds in question. And if the proponent of middle knowledge is thus forced to reject the guiding idea of the possible-worlds semantics for counterfactuals, continued reliance on that semantics as a logical underpinning for the theory becomes extremely dubious. Freddoso says, "Molinists may have to modify [the standard possible-worlds semantics] or propose an alternative capable of sustaining realism with respect to conditional future contingents" (pp. 74-75). He has also said, "we might wonder why it wasn't perfectly obvious from the start that comparative similarity wouldn't help us if the conditionals in question involve genuine similar indeterminism."

It seems to me that Freddoso's repudiation of the possible-worlds semantics is a double-edged move. On the one hand, it makes the theory of middle knowledge somewhat harder to attack, since it becomes difficult for a critic to draw inferences concerning counterfactuals of freedom in any principled way. But it also removes a good deal of the philosophical substance from the theory, and those who are inclined to be suspicious of counterfactuals (especially, counterfactuals of freedom) in any case are hardly going to be reassured by being deprived of any systematic account of their semantics. Significantly, Freddoso writes "I freely admit that the positive task of elaborating a metaphysical and semantic foundation for this doctrine is enormous and has hardly yet begun" (p. 75).

Valuable as are Freddoso's detailed arguments and analyses, it may be that his most important contribution lies in the reintegration of divine foreknowledge into a broader theological context—an integration which was taken for granted in traditional theology, but has largely been neglected in recent philosophy. In order to conserve space, I shall limit myself to commenting on the single most important point, the connection between foreknowledge and divine providence. "[B]elief in divine foreknowledge," Freddoso tells us, "is not in itself a foundational tenet of classical Western theism. Instead, it derives its lofty theological status from its intimate connection with the absolutely central doctrine that God is perfectly provident" (p. 2). Perfect providence, in turn, means that

God, the divine artisan, freely and knowingly plans, orders, and provides for all the effects that constitute His artifact, the created universe with its entire history, and executes His chosen plan by playing an active causal role sufficient to ensure its exact realization. Since God is the perfect artisan, not even the most trivial details escape His providential decree. Thus, whatever occurs is properly said to be specifically decreed by God... (p. 3)

The apparently damaging implications with regard to evil are turned away by the claim (dubiously coherent, in my view) that God intends only the good actions which are part of his plan, and merely permits those which are evil.
What is important in the present context, however, is that simple foreknowledge, foreknowledge without middle knowledge, is not sufficient to enable God to be perfectly provident. Indeed, I claim to have shown that simple foreknowledge is of no use whatever for the doctrine of providence. Simple foreknowledge provides God with knowledge of what will actually occur, but this knowledge, which is subsequent to God's own decision about what he will himself do, cannot then be used to guide that decision. And thus we obtain an important result: Those who wish to combine a libertarian conception of free will with a strong doctrine of providence must embrace middle knowledge. Those who affirm simple foreknowledge but deny middle knowledge are very likely to find themselves with a doctrine of foreknowledge which is theologically useless.

Freddoso's work on Molina is indispensable. It is an outstanding contribution to the literature on divine foreknowledge, and by far the best thing produced to date on middle knowledge. Those who work on either of these topics will overlook it to their own great loss.

NOTES


4. Strictly speaking, what is new here is that accidental necessity is not closed under entailment for contingent propositions; on Freddoso's explication, necessary propositions cannot in any case be accidentally necessary.


6. This point is argued in God, Time, and Knowledge, pp. 32-35.

7. Personal communication.

8. See, God, Time, and Knowledge, Chapter 3.


DAVID BURRELL, C.S.C., University of Notre Dame.

In a challenging and penetrating inquiry, this philosopher from Aberdeen develops a sustained argument whereby the world in which we live assumes its rightfully primary place, and it is this world's continuing into the future