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Book Review: Divine Providence: The Molinist Account

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BOOK REVIEWS

Divine Providence: The Molinist Account, by **Thomas P. Flint**. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. xi + 258. $35.00.

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Thomas Flint's *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* sets a new standard for the discussion of its topic, a standard that will not soon be surpassed or even easily equaled. The book combines rigorous logical analysis and ingenious proofs with a lucid, highly readable style and an engaging sense of humor. (Many readers may learn here for the first time of the Vatican cattle ranch in Montana, where visitors are advised to be circumspect so as to avoid being set upon by the papal bulls.)

The first chapter presents the "twin bases of Molinism," namely the traditional conception of divine providence and libertarian free will. The traditional conception of providence combines divine foreknowledge and sovereignty in reaching the conclusion that God is "knowingly and lovingly directing each and every event and each and every creature toward the end he has ordained for them" (p. 12). Flint has no difficulty in showing that such a conception has been widely held in the Christian tradition, and he appeals both to religious tradition and to philosophical argument in building a case for libertarianism. The combination of the two he terms "libertarian traditionalism," and he maintains that for the orthodox Christian it is "if not the only, then at least the best game in town" (p 34).

Notoriously, difficulties have been encountered in reconciling free will with the divine control of all events. Enter, in chapter 2, the Molinist account of providence, which shows how God can indeed control the course of affairs without interfering with human freedom. God can do this because of his knowledge of the "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom," which inform him what each free creature would do in any choice situation with which it might be confronted; thus God can leave the creatures free while taking no chances whatever concerning what they may do with their freedom. In this chapter Flint elaborates the Molinist position with a good deal of philosophical imagination: we learn of the four "moments" of divine knowledge, of creaturely world-types, of galaxies of possible worlds, and of possible worlds which are feasible or infeasible, chosen, rejected, or culled.

The third chapter addresses the main alternatives to the Molinist conception of providence, namely Thomism and the "open view" of God.

"Thomism" as used here refers, in a general sense, to all varieties of theological determinism; a Protestant might well have spoken instead of "Calvinism." The "open view" is so called from the book, *The Openness of God*[1]; its most characteristic affirmation is that God's providential governance of the world is not guided by comprehensive foreknowledge of the consequences of his actions. In a word, God is a risk-taker. According to Flint, these are the *only* significant alternatives available to an orthodox Christian; he rightly maintains that neither "simple foreknowledge" (foreknowledge without middle knowledge) nor the "eternity solution" represents a distinct alternative. The reason for this is, that the divine knowledge of the future posited by simple foreknowledge is *of no use whatever* to God in his providential governance of the world, and the same is true of the timeless knowledge of the future possessed by God according to the doctrine of divine timelessness.[2] The doctrine of timelessness can however be combined with theological determinism (as it is by most Thomists) or with middle knowledge; in principle, then, timelessness is neutral between the three views of providence, rather than constituting a distinct alternative on its own.

Having set out the alternatives, Flint argues for the preferability of Molinism. Broadly speaking, Thomism is rejected because it is not libertarian, and the open view is rejected because it is not traditional. (We will return to one aspect of this discussion later on.) It is noteworthy that, while Flint's book contains a good deal of insightful, even scintillating, philosophical analysis, the positive case for Molinism is based almost entirely on theology. Indeed, Flint goes so far as to tax his fellow Roman Catholics who affirm the open view (such as Richard Purtill and the late Peter Geach) with the question, "whether or not they think solemn pronouncements by ecumenical councils are binding on their faith, and, if not, what (if anything) they think is binding, and why" (p. 102n). Philosophically, there are at least two notable omissions — matters one might have expected to see addressed which are passed over in silence. First, there is no positive metaphysical case made for the existence of true counterfactuals of freedom, and no attempt at an explanation of how God can know them assuming they exist.[3] The closest we come to this is the observation that ordinary people often accept (in effect) the existence of such truths. For example, no one objects that the story of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is impossible on the grounds that there can be no truths of the sort that are being revealed to Scrooge — truths about *what would occur* were Scrooge to continue in his present course of life. This may be so, but such considerations don't amount to much as support for the metaphysical possibility of such truths. As Flint recognizes, we find tales of time travel both enjoyable and apparently coherent, but most philosophers consider time travel to be metaphysically impossible.

The second noteworthy omission is Flint's failure to offer any solution to the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge with libertarian freedom for creatures. This is surprising for several reasons: Molinism is just as vulnerable to this objection as is any other theory of divine foreknowledge; Flint has written on this topic in the past; and there are dif-

ferent possible solutions which have different implications for the theological problems he addresses in the last section of the book.

The next four chapters are occupied with different kinds of objections to Molinism and middle knowledge. Chapter 4 considers some traditional Thomistic attacks, while chapter 5 is devoted to the "grounding" objection: What, if anything, is the basis for the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom — what *makes* them true? After several pages of preliminary sparring Flint comes to what he takes to be the most serious form of this objection — and to the best answer to it. A standard view, which Flint accepts, holds that a counterfactual is true if and only if its consequent is true in the world closest to the actual world in which the antecedent is true. The "grounds" for the truth of the counterfactual, then, lie in that "closest possible world" to the actual world. So

> a counterfactual such as $(c \to z)$ is grounded only if z would be grounded if c were true — in other words, only if, in the nearest world in which the agent in question is in c, she grounds z — say, by performing action Z. But if the agent is truly free then aren't there worlds in which she is in c and *refrains* from performing Z that are just as close to our world as any world in which she is in c and *performs* Z? If a Z-less world is just as close to the actual world as is a Z-ful one, then the claim that z would be grounded if she were in c is false; and if it is false, then our biconditional entails that $(c \to z)$ is ungrounded.
>
> In response to such an objection, Molinists can probably do no better than repeat the point made years ago by Plantinga that, in comparing worlds, one point of similarity is similarity regarding counterfactuals. . . . [I]f, as Plantinga contends, "one feature determining the similarity of worlds is whether they share their counterfactuals," then the Z-ful world may well be more similar to the actual world due to the fact that, both in it and in the actual world, $(c \to z)$ is true, whereas the same counterfactual is false in the relevant Z-less worlds (pp. 135-36).

This passage would seem to admit of paraphrase as follows: The counterfactual $(c \to z)$ is true in the actual world because z is true in the world nearest the actual world in which c is true, and that world *is* nearest to the actual world because it shares with the actual world the counterfactual $(c \to z)$! But this appears to be an unusually clear case of circular explanation — or "circular grounding" — and there is no reason to suppose such a circle would be virtuous rather than vicious. Molinists, however, are well aware of the threatening circle, and take some pains to avoid it. Flint, for instance, has told me in correspondence that while there is a sense in which "the counterfactual $(c \to z)$ is true in the actual world because z is true in the world nearest the actual world in which c is true," the "because" in this sentence, correctly understood, is *not explanatory*. And if it is not, there is no vicious explanatory circle. But one may ask, if the "because" in that sentence is not explanatory, then what becomes of the answer to the grounding objection? Yet Flint, in

the passage quoted above, seems clearly to be presenting what he takes to be an answer to that objection. However we may finally interpret Flint's position, the following dilemma seems inescapable: If comparative similarity among possible worlds does *not* provide the grounding for the truth of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, then we have been given no answer whatever to the grounding objection. If on the other hand comparative similarity *does* provide such grounding, then the charge of vicious circularity returns in full force.[4] Flint may be looking for a way to escape between the horns of this dilemma, but I don't think he can avoid being impaled on one or the other.

The next two chapters (6 and 7) are occupied with objections to middle knowledge put forward by me and by Robert Adams. I have recently discussed these objections,[5] and will refrain (no doubt to the relief of both editor and readers!) from repeating myself here. Flint has mounted a concerted counter-attack against these arguments, a counter-attack that he considers entirely successful. I disagree, but I must admit that at present I see no way to make further progress in resolving this disagreement, or to compel the Molinist to concede the soundness of the anti-Molinist arguments. On this topic, readers must reach their own conclusions.

The final section of the book deals with four specific issues concerning providence — papal infallibility, predictive prophecy, unanswered prayer, and "praying for things to have happened." It is widely recognized, even by non-Molinists, that Molinism, if true, should make an important contribution to our understanding of God's providential governance of the world. But as Flint observes, Molinists have often limited themselves to issuing promissory notes, whereas his view is that "the time for cashing in such notes has come," and he presents these chapters as "early installments in the redemption plan" (p. 180). It is in this section that Flint's originality comes most to the fore: so far as I am aware, nothing comparably detailed has been attempted before by anyone from Molina on down. Interestingly, it turns out to be more difficult to give Molinist accounts of these aspects of providence than one might have expected. Special difficulties arise at a number of points, to which Flint finds suitably ingenious solutions. Whatever one's view of these solutions, he surely is right in wanting Molinists to move on from an "obsession with defense" (p. 179) and to show how their doctrine illuminates concrete issues such as these.

This discussion will conclude with some remarks about the problem of evil, and about the contrast on this issue between Molinism and the open view of God. Flint questions my claim (which is supported by both Adams and Plantinga) that the open view is better placed than Molinism to deal with this problem.[6] He claims, on the contrary, that "all things considered, God's lacking middle knowledge would make the problem of evil even more difficult for the Christian to handle. For if God knows only probabilities, then he takes enormous risks in creating significantly free beings: he risks creating a world in which many, or most, or even all of his free creatures consistently reject him, a world in which they use their freedom to degrade others and themselves. It seems to me that one can reasonably argue that a good and loving God would not take such a risk" (p. 107). In

response to this, I invite Flint to consider *the actual world*, in which not all (God be thanked!), but certainly many and perhaps most of our fellow-creatures "consistently reject him, . . . [and] use their freedom to degrade others and themselves." And now consider this question: is this situation *easier* to reconcile with the goodness and love of God if we suppose that *every particular instance of evil and suffering was specifically planned and ordained by God to occur*?[7] Or is it better to say that God has indeed taken risks in creating this world, and that God's heart is deeply grieved at the grave misuse many of us make of our freedom?

The Molinist view of providence presents to us the idea of a world that is, in certain respects, remarkably *safe*; it is a world in which, "down to the smallest detail, things are as they are because God knowingly decided to create such a world" (p. 75). In such a world, we think, there may indeed be many things whose reasons we do not understand. After all, who are we to claim to plumb the secrets of the divine counsels? But there will be, there can be, nothing *ultimately* without a good reason, nothing which does not, in the end, play a constructive role in the wise and good plan God has for the world.

Without doubt, many Christians would like to believe we live in such a world, and find comfort in the thought that we do. That everything that ever happens has its good and sufficient reason in the divine plan, and thus nothing is ultimately to be regretted (though many things may cause us regret in our present, inevitably short-sighted, view of things) — that this should be so is a source of comfort to many. Until, that is, a truly horrendous example of evil confronts us, such as the case of Zosia, a young Jewish girl in the Warsaw ghetto, whose eyes were literally ripped from their sockets by Nazi soldiers for their own amusement.[8] Isn't there is something obscene about supposing that there is some "greater good" in terms of which such an enormity can be justified? The New Testament, in contrast, does not view the world as a safe place. On the contrary: as Greg Boyd has recently reminded us, the world is seen to be a *war zone*, and in a war zone atrocities and horrendous evils are the norm rather than the exception. The ultimate victory of God's cause is not in doubt, but at present that victory for the most part *is not evident to us*. Our God is a *fighting God*, one whose arm is strong and whose final triumph cannot be prevented — but in the meantime, much can and does happen that is contrary to his loving will and purpose for his creatures. It is this vision of God, and his providence, that the open view of God seeks to capture.[9]

NOTES

1.   Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

2.   For argument, see my *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapter 3. We thus see that, from a certain point of view, the denial of comprehensive divine foreknowledge, which is by far the most controversial aspect of the open view, is not essential to it. Some adherents of simple foreknowledge, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, hold conceptions of providence extremely similar to that of the open view of God, and the same is

true of Linda Zagzebski, who remains undecided between simple foreknowledge and divine timelessness.

3.   In the introduction to his translation of Molina's *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), Fred Freddoso writes: "I freely admit that the positive task of elaborating a metaphysical and semantic foundation for this doctrine [of middle knowledge] is immense and has hardly yet begun" (p. 75). So far as I can tell, Flint's book does little to change this situation.

4.   According to Alvin Plantinga, "[W]e can't look to similarity, among possible worlds, as *explaining* counterfactuality, or as *founding* or *grounding* it. (Indeed, any founding or grounding in the neighborhood goes in the opposite direction.)" ("Replies," in James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga*, Dordrecht: D. Riedel, 1985, p. 378). Here there is clearly no vicious explanatory circle, but neither is there an answer to the grounding objection.

5.   In "Middle Knowledge: A Refutation Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy* 12:2 (April 1995), pp. 223-36, and "Explanatory Priority: Transitive and Unequivocal, A Response to William Craig," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (June 1997), pp. 389-93. A correction is needed, however. In the former article I put forward a definition of 'bring about' as follows:

> S brings it about that Y iff: For some X, S causes it to be the case that X, and $(X \& H) \Rightarrow Y$, and $\sim(H \Rightarrow Y)$, and $\sim(\sim X \rightarrow Y)$ [where H = the past history of the world up to the moment at which X occurs]

Partly as a result of a criticism of Flint's (see p. 154), I have come to see that the final clause, '$\sim(\sim X \rightarrow Y)$', is a mistake. That clause expresses the idea that one should not be said to bring about something that was going to happen anyway. But, upon reflection, that simply is not correct: that something was going to happen anyway may affect the nature of a person's *responsibility* for bringing it about, but it does not change the *fact* that she brings it about. (If I saw down a tree that would have fallen in the next windstorm it is still I, not the wind, that brings it about that the tree is down.) The corrected formula, then, is

> S brings it about that Y iff: For some X, S causes it to be the case that X, and $(X \& H) \Rightarrow Y$, and $\sim(H \Rightarrow Y)$.

6.   This point is merely one instance of a more general truth: the more complete and detailed we suppose God's control over earthly events to be, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile the evils that occur with the love and justice of God. Thus, I judge the problem of evil to be insoluble for Thomists and other theological determinists; to be slightly easier, but still extremely difficult, for Molinists; and to be considerably easier for proponents of the open view of God. It is of course still easier for process theists, but in order to get this result they greatly diminish the *power* of God to affect worldly affairs, something the open view refuses to do.

7.   Note in particular Flint's assertion that "if Judas sins, it is because God knowingly put him in a set of circumstances in which he would sin, and knowingly refrained from putting him in a set of circumstances in which he would act virtuously" (p. 118).

8.   See Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), pp. 33-34.

9.   My thanks to Thomas Flint for his extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this review.