Ken Perszyk, ed., MOLINISM: THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

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BOOK REVIEWS

Molinism: The Contemporary Debate, edited by Ken Perszyk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 320pp.

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This important book brings together defenders and critics of Molinism in roughly equal proportions (seven pro-Molinist chapters, ten by critics or non-Molinists), with a focus on objections other than the usual grounding problem (posed first in the contemporary debate by Robert M. Adams in 1977).[1] Although none of the anti-Molinists achieve a knock-out (an incontrovertible refutation), they do succeed in significantly raising the costs of the Molinist view. I came away from reading the volume with my opinion confirmed that Molinism, although possibly true, is less probable than either of its main competitors (open theism and compatibilism).

William Hasker states well the fundamental problem for the Molinist in his reply to Trenton Merricks (in chapter 4). Peter van Inwagen's Consequence Argument is the only compelling argument for libertarian (anti-compatibilist) free will. Although some philosophers (perhaps Thomas Flint or Alvin Plantinga) may take incompatibilism to be self-evident or credible in a "basic" way, it is the sort of technical thesis that I would take to stand in need of such an argument, if it is to be credible at all. Van Inwagen's argument assumes two things: that any determining preconditions of our choices are beyond our control at the point of choice, and that being beyond our control is a condition that is preserved by the relation of necessary consequence. This provides a good argument against causal compatibilism, since the initial conditions of the universe and the causal laws of nature are clearly beyond our present control.

However, an exactly parallel argument demonstrates that Molinism is also incompatible with free will (a point also made by Robert M. Adams, in

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[1]Robert M. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), 109–117.

his 1991 "An Anti-Molinist Argument").[2] If God knew the truth-values of all subjunctive conditionals of freedom prior to the creation of the world, then it would seem to follow that those truth-values are beyond our present control. However, Molinism is committed to the view that the truth of a subjunctive conditional of freedom (SCF), together with the truth of its antecedent (which corresponds to matters that are by hypothesis beyond our control at the point of choice) necessitate the truth of its consequent, which corresponds to the actualization of a particular free choice.

Defenders of Molinism, such as Thomas Flint and William Lane Craig, have responded to this version of the Consequence Argument by denying that the truth-values of the SCFs are beyond our control at the corresponding point of choice, even though the truth of those conditionals had causal consequences in the past (through God's Middle Knowledge and consequent providential creation).[3] Compatibilists can make exactly the same move, with the same degree of plausibility, supposing that we have "counterfactual power" over the initial conditions of the universe or the actual laws of nature (in fact, David K. Lewis explicitly endorsed the latter option). If Molinists respond instead by denying one of van Inwagen's transfer principles, once again compatibilists have exactly the same option. Molinists thus face a dilemma: if the Consequence Argument is cogent, then they must choose between middle knowledge and free will (just as the compatibilist must choose between causal determinism and free will). Alternatively, if the Consequence Argument is fallacious, then we are left without sufficient reason for preferring Molinist conditionals to standard determinism.

In the opening chapters of the book, Hasker, Flint, Merricks and Zimmerman debate versions of Hasker's objection to Molinism: his "old" 1989[4] and "new" 1999[5] arguments. In the old argument, Hasker argued that Molinism is inconsistent with free choice, since agents cannot bring it about that the appropriate SCFs be true. If they cannot bring these things about, then, since the SCFs together with conditions outside the agent's control entail the agent's choices, we again have a compelling version of the Consequence Argument. Hasker argues that the agent S cannot bring about the truth of the conditional "if C, then S does A" by doing A in C, since the conditional has to be true in the nearby worlds where C is false, and thus S's doing A in C is not necessary in the circumstances for

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[2]Robert M. Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument," in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeway Publishing, 1991), 343–353.

[3]For example, Thomas Flint claimed in 1999 that, "There are facts about the past that have had causal consequences in the past, but over which we have had . . . counterfactual control." Thomas P. Flint, "A New Anti-Anti-Molinist Argument," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), 299–305, at 303.

[4]William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), chaps. 2 and 10.

[5]William Hasker, "A New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), 291–297.

the truth of the conditional. In other words, the conditional would still have been true, even if S had not done A in C (because the conditional would have been true in worlds in which C itself is false). This is a strong argument for S's inability to bring about the truth of the conditional, and so for the conditional's truth's being beyond S's control.

Trenton Merricks does not offer here a cogent response to the old argument. Merricks points out that S's doing A in C is sufficient for the truth of the conditional (given strong centering), but this is irrelevant to Hasker's argument, since sufficiency is itself not sufficient for causal production.

Thomas Flint, in his 1998 book *Divine Providence*, denied Hasker's claim that true SCFs in general retain their truth-values in nearby worlds that differ with respect to any matter of fact.[6] However, even if he is right about this, it still might be true that SCFs *with true antecedents* are true in nearby worlds in which their antecedents are false. This special case is the only one that Hasker's old argument requires: he doesn't need the stronger assumption that the truth-values of SCFs are always more robust (because more fundamental) than all concrete facts. Instead, Hasker could rely on the following general fact about bringing about:

(BA$_K$) S brings it about that X at t only if, if S did not exist at t, then X would have been false.

This is only a necessary condition for bringing it about, not a definition. In addition, BA$_K$ does not hold in every case. There are exceptions: cases of overdetermination of X, and cases in which S's action preempts some mechanism that would have coincidentally brought about X in S's absence. However, BA$_K$ must hold in all typical cases, which is sufficient for Hasker's purposes, since this provides grounds for thinking that cases of freedom are restricted to a few exceptional cases involving coincidence. Moreover, if the Molinist is permitted to posit massive, coincidental overdetermination in order to secure human freedom, exactly the same move is open to the compatibilist.

Given BA$_K$, Hasker's old argument can be filled in as follows. Suppose that F is some true SCF about agent S at time t, and suppose further that the antecedent (and therefore also the consequent) of F is actually true. To demonstrate that S did not bring about the truth of S at time t, given BA$_K$, it suffices to show that F itself would have been true, had S not existed at t. That is, we need only principle (4), which follows from premises (1)–(3) as follows:

(1) If F is a true SCF about S at t, and the antecedent of F is true, then F would still be true if the antecedent of F were false.

(2) If F is a true SCF about S at t, and F would still be true if the antecedent of F were false, then F would still be true if the antecedent of F were false *and* S did not exist at t.

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[6]Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 138–150.

(3) If F is a true SCF about S at t, then S's non-existence at t entails the falsity of the antecedent of F.

(4) Therefore, if F is a true SCF about S at t, and the antecedent of F is true, then F would still be true if S did not exist at t. (From 1, 2, 3)

Premise (1) states the modal stability of SCFs, which I will defend below. Premise (3) simply states an obvious fact about all SCFs: their antecedents entail the existence of the relevant free agent.

Premise (2) is correct because variations in the truth-value of an SCF like F from one world to a nearby world (i.e., from a nearby world in which the antecedent of F is false to another nearby world in which the antecedent of F is false because S does not exist at t) should depend only on relevant actions of the agent S at time t in that other world. However, if S does not exist at all in that second world, she can obviously be doing nothing there that could falsify the conditional F. The world w closest to the actual one in which S does not exist at t should be a world exactly like the actual world up just before the moment t, at which time S should vanish miraculously (using the usual Lewisian protocol). If F is true in all nearby worlds, including worlds in which the antecedent is false, then such a world w should contain all that is needed to verify F and nothing that would tend to falsify it.

In defense of premise (1): since the antecedents of the SCFs are true in part because God weakly actualized this world in light of His middle knowledge of truth of those very same SCFs, it renders God's middle knowledge utterly mysterious to suppose that SCFs might be false in nearby worlds in which their antecedents are false. To illustrate, let's take a typical true SCF with a true antecedent:

(F) If S were in C, S would freely do A.

God knew that F was true long before the truth of its antecedent, and His knowledge of F plays a role in explaining why its antecedent is in fact true. We are to suppose, if we deny (1), that if God had not chosen to weakly actualize F's antecedent, then F itself might not have been true. Hence, the object of God's middle knowledge (F) is true *in part because* God acted in light of his knowledge of F, a vicious circularity.

To make the Molinist account of God's knowledge and primordial deliberation coherent, we must suppose that the conditional F was stably true in the "logical moment" in which God is deciding whether or not to weakly actualize its antecedent, since it had to be true in that moment that God was Himself free either to actualize or not to actualize F's antecedent. If any agent X is deliberating whether to weakly actualize some condition Y, Y is truly up to X at this stage in X's deliberation (and so, both the truth and falsity of Y are feasible for X at this stage) and the truth of Z depends counterfactually on the truth of Y, then X cannot know at that stage in X's deliberation that Z is true, since Z is not in that moment stably true. This is true even if the agent X is God. Hence, God cannot enjoy middle

knowledge of the truth-values of SCFs at the beginning of creation of the world unless Hasker is right about the counterfactual stability of true SCFs with true antecedents. Hence, Hasker's 1989 argument is sound.

Flint takes Hasker to be providing in his 1999 book a stipulative definition of the phrase "brings it about that," as a preliminary to a new argument for the inconsistency of Molinism with the ability of agents to bring about the truth of the relevant SCFs. Flint argues that, given that stipulation, the Molinist has reason to reject the following proposition:

(α) The proposition that it is not possible that an agent bring about the truth of an SCF entails that it is not possible that an agent have the power to bring about the truth of that SCF.

However, it is most charitable to take Hasker's proposed 2000 "definition" as his best theory about the essence of bringing it about. In fact, Flint himself calls Hasker's definition his "final account" of bringing it about (p. 40). If we take principle (α) as a claim about the nature of powers to bring things about, then it is unimpeachable (at least, in a modal logic at least as strong as S4). A power that cannot possibly be exercised successfully is no power at all. This is surely a necessary truth. Consequently, if it is possible that A has the power to bring about the truth of p, then surely it is possible that it is possible that A bring it about. Given S4, if it is possible that it is possible that A bring it about that p is true, then it is simply possible that A do so.

Flint gives a sophisticated argument (on page 42) for the falsity of (α), given the assumption of Molinism together with an account of "bringing it about" given by Hasker in 1999. Since, as I've argued, (α) is clearly true, if Flint's argument is correct, either Molinism or Hasker's account (or both) must be false. Thus, we must look at Hasker's 1999 definition of bringing about, taking it now as a theoretical account and not merely as a stipulation:

(BA) A brings it about that Y iff: for some X, A causes it to be the case that X, and the conjunction of X and H entail Y, and H by itself does not entail Y, where H is the history of the world prior to A's causing it to be the case that X.

Flint does not say whether he would accept (BA) as a true principle concerning agents' bringing things about, but he offers no objection, and it certainly seems plausible. At this point, the sensible thing for the Molinist to do is to deny that SCFs should ever be included in the history of the world, or at least, to insist that they should never be included in the history of the world prior to the truth (or falsity?) of their antecedents. Flint does just that, but then he introduces again the possibility of allowing the anti-Molinist to include SCFs in the relevant histories of the world by stipulative definition. In my opinion, this is a fruitless way of pursuing the debate, since once the phrase "brings it about" or the word "history" is treated as subject to mere stipulation, we can no longer rely on any of our prior intuitions about principles expressed by means of those phrases. Since both are ancient and common, this is a recipe for confusion, generating much more smoke than light, despite Flint's charitable intentions.

Hasker offers a reason for thinking that all SCFs should be included in the history of the world from the very beginning (on the assumption of Molinism): they exercise a kind of rational influence over all of God's acts, via God's middle knowledge of their truth. At this point, we reach a familiar impasse. Molinists like Flint will deny that God's middle knowledge of the truth-values of the SCFs makes them causally prior (as opposed to being prior as a reason for action) to early events in creation's history and consequently will deny that Hasker's (BA) demonstrates that their truth-values are beyond the control of human agents. My assessment of the situation is this: Hasker's new 1999 argument has less potential dialectically than did his 1989 argument.

Robert Adams's version of the Consequence Argument brings up a further but related problem about Molinism broached by several of the chapters: the fact that Molinism is seriously underspecified, since it fails to characterize with any precision the class of SCFs. What must the antecedents of such conditionals contain? To his credit, Edward Wierenga acknowledges this problem and seeks a solution. As Wierenga points out, we can't suppose that the SCFs are just any class of subjunctive conditionals of the following form:

(4) If person S were in circumstances C at t, S would freely perform action A then.

Since subjunctive conditionals don't satisfy the logical principle of the strengthening of the antecedent, a conditional like (4) might be true, even though a conditional of form (5) were also true:

(5) If a person S were in circumstances (C & C') at t, S would not freely perform action A then.

In order for God's Middle Knowledge to be useful and reliable (for the purposes of planning), there must be a class of conditionals that specify "the circumstances" of S's choice with maximal content. However, what does "maximal" mean here? We cannot use the method employed by Alvin Plantinga in *The Nature of Necessity* when he defined possible worlds as maximal possible states of affairs, since it is essential that the circumstances C be the sort of things that can be realized at time t in more than one possible world. Wierenga suggests that the maximal antecedents are those that fully describe a world up to (but not including) the time t (an "initial segment" of the world). However, in the context of Molinism this suggestion just will not do, since Molinism entails (as Flint and Plantinga have recognized) that free creatures have "counterfactual control" over the past.

I would argue that a fact cannot be both part of the circumstances of my choice and under my control at the point of choice. Flint disagrees,[7] and it is easy to see how Molinists are led naturally to such a conclusion, but this supposition results in trouble for Molinism. Such temporal

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[7]Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 249–250.

loops in counterfactual dependency can generate a circularity that would effectively stymie God's providential control over creation, resulting in the collapse of Molinism into a version of Open Theism![8] Molinists have generally taken it to be a crucial virtue of their theory that it provides an account of God's meticulous providence over His creation. This is in fact very much in doubt, if, as it seems, Molinism implies that God could be faced with a set of dependency circles into which He cannot break.

If the set of actually true SCFs happened to instantiate such a circularity, God would never be able to strongly actualize any of the antecedents of the subjunctive conditionals of freedom, and so He would never be able to "weakly actualize" (in Plantinga's sense) any specific possible world. The truth of the antecedents would depend counterfactually on the truth of the propositions about later free acts, and the truth of the propositions about those free acts would depend counterfactually on the truth of the antecedents. God could only weakly actualize some classes of worlds, running the inescapable risk that results from the fact that the actualization of any particular world within that class depends on the circular determination of the full antecedents of freedom by the free choices of those very creatures.

Suppose, for example, that two persons S1 and S2 have the power to perform and not to perform two distinct, mutually independent actions A and B at time t, and suppose that the relevant conditionals of freedom are these:

(6) If S2 were in circumstances (C & A), then S2 would freely choose B at t.

(7) If S2 were in circumstances (C & ~A), then S2 would not freely choose B at t.

(8) If S1 were in circumstances (C & B), then S1 would freely choose ~A at t.

(9) If S1 were in circumstances (C & ~B), then S1 would not freely choose A at t.

Suppose further God knows from eternity past the truth of all four conditionals, and He is able to create S1 and S2 and to strongly actualize C. However, God cannot weakly actualize either the world in which S1 and S2 freely do A and B (respectively), or the world in which neither S1 nor S2 perform them, since the totality of conditions He can strongly actualize falls short of verifying any of the relevant conditionals of freedom. God would need S1's cooperation to weakly actualize S2's performance

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[8]Another objection to Wierenga: God's middle knowledge itself would be part of the initial segment of the world up to t. Consider:

(7) If S were in circumstances C (where circumstances C includes the fact that God knows that if S were in circumstances C, then S would freely do A), then S would freely do A.

Such SCFs cannot be contingent, since C now entails the truth of the consequent. Of course, as we have seen, Molinists will simply deny that facts about God's middle knowledge belong to the world's history.

of B, and vice versa, leaving God unable to weakly actualize either set of free actions. Despite having complete Middle Knowledge, in such a world God lacks the power of meticulous Providence. We could label a world in which this holds an "Open Molinist" world. The question for Molinists is: how do they know that there are no open Molinist worlds? How, in particular, do they know that ours is not one?

Obviously, this is just the latest salvo in a long battle. A great deal more work needs to be done in identifying the proper antecedents of the SCFs, and in working out the relevant semantic and logical principles. It is to the credit of Perszyk's volume that it brings this question so close to the surface.

This same problem may be related to a difficulty raised by Greg Restall in chapter 14 ("Molinism's Thin Red Line"). Building on a 1994 paper by Nuel Belnap and Mitchell Green ("Indeterminism and the Thin Red Line"), Restall demonstrates that Molinism is incompatible with the branching-future model of time. Molinists must believe that our ignorance of what will actually happen is ignorance about which complete, linearly ordered world is actual. On this picture, there is no reason why the ordering of time or causation should correspond to any constraint on the construction of the true, "maximal" subjunctive conditionals of creaturely freedom.

Dean Zimmerman's "Yet Another Anti-Molinist Argument" (summarized in this volume and debated there by Zimmerman and William Lane Craig) also illustrates the same problem. Zimmerman argues that, since the Molinist has no principle for constraining the content of the antecedents of SCFs, it's quite possible that they contain information about the very distant past (before the Big Bang) or facts about regions of spacetime causally unconnected to our own. This opens up the possibility of "voodoo worlds": worlds in which God is able to arrange that everyone acts precisely as He would wish them to do, simply by strongly actualizing remote conditions associated with the antecedents of the relevant SCFs. Zimmerman argues, plausibly, that such worlds illustrate that the truth of Molinism is insufficient to ground the existence of morally significant freedom.

William Lane Craig assumes in chapter 10, "Yet Another Failed Anti-Molinist Argument," that the relevant circumstances in the antecedents of SCFs must be limited to the backward light cone of the choice—that is, to those conditions that are causally prior and connected to the choice. This makes sense for an open theist or a causal determinist to make such an assumption (since for them, the SCFs encode facts about causal determination), but it seems unmotivated from a Molinist perspective. The limitation to the immediate causal antecedents makes sense only if the SCF encode information about what those causal antecedents do and do not entail, and nothing more. However, once we suppose (with Molinism) that they also encode information that outruns the entailments of those causal antecedents, we are left without any principle that excludes factual questions about causally isolated island universes, or even questions about the future of our own universe, from the antecedents of those SCFs.

The book's last two chapters, by William Hasker and Derk Pereboom, do not pertain strictly speaking to Molinism but are nonetheless quite engaging. Pereboom defends hard determinism, with its denial of moral desert as a fundamental kind, as an option for Christians. Pereboom demonstrates that determinists have a lot of resources for making sense of praise, blame, guilt, and repentance. He reminds us that many theodicies, including Hick's soul-making account or Marilyn Adams's account of the value of identification with Christ, do not require a strong doctrine of free will. Perbeoom's challenge deserves careful response from the defenders of libertarian free will.

Wiliam Hasker argues, quite convincingly by my lights, for the superiority of a "general-policy" theodicy to a "specific-benefit" theodicy in accounting for "natural evils" (pain, suffering and death, including that of non-human and even pre-human creatures). He also raises legitimate questions about the epistemological consequences for ordinary human action of the skeptical theist strategy. However, I am puzzled by Hasker's assumption that a general-policy theodicy is unavailable to those, like Molinists, Thomists, or theological determinists, who believe in meticulous Providence. Hasker seems to overlook the possible application to God of the doctrine of double effect: the distinction between those consequences of God's plan that are intended from those that are merely foreseen. Just because God foresees that a certain general policy will result in specific harms for specific creatures, it doesn't follow that God must intend those harms, nor (a fortiori) that God must intend those specific harms for the sake of specific benefits. Hasker may assume that God's love for and justice toward individuals would require some compensating benefit to each creature to whom some specific harm is foreseen, but this neglects the possibility that the very identity of that creature might be essentially tied to the set of God's actual general policies and to a set of causally prior conditions, in such a way that it is metaphysically impossible for that creature to exist without running afoul of that specific harm. (See Robert M. Adams's "Evil and Self-Identity."[9])

Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century, by Maria Rosa Antognazza. Trans. Gerald Parks. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. xxv + 322pp. $60 hardcover.

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Leibniz is universally acknowledged as one of the great philosophers, but his writings on Christian doctrines have been largely ignored. Partly this is a function of the interests of the philosophers who have written

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[9]"Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," *Noûs* 13 (1979), 53–65.