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COULD GOD DO SOMETHING EVIL? A MOLINIST SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE FREEDOM

R. Zachary Manis

One important version of the problem of divine freedom is that, if God is *essentially* good, and if freedom logically requires being able to do otherwise, then God is not free with respect to willing the good, and thus He is not morally praiseworthy for His goodness. I develop and defend a broadly Molinist solution to this problem, which, I argue, provides the best way out of the difficulty for orthodox theists who are unwilling to relinquish the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. The solution is that the divine essence includes the property of *transworld goodness*: i.e., for any possible morally significant choice that God could have faced, if God had actually faced it, God would have chosen to will the good. This view makes coherent the otherwise paradoxical theological intuition that it is within God's power to do something evil, but He *would not* ever do such a thing.

Introduction

Could God do something evil? This question is the point of departure for a number of critical reflections on the logical consistency of the attributes typically ascribed to God by orthodox theists. One such argument, popularized by Nelson Pike, pits divine goodness against divine omnipotence.¹ The primary aim of the present essay is to explore the closely-related issue of the apparent incompatibility between the attributes of divine goodness and divine freedom that the question sometimes is thought to reveal.

To begin, consider the following set of propositions—all of which, historically, theological libertarians (e.g., Arminians) have been inclined to affirm:

- (1) Freedom (of the kind required for moral responsibility) logically requires being able to do otherwise.
- (2) God is free (in whatever way is required for being a moral agent).
- (3) God is essentially perfectly good—i.e., of metaphysical necessity, God wills the good.

¹Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (July 1969): 208–216, reprinted in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 67–82.



The logical incompatibility of these three propositions is apparent, as Jonathan Edwards forcefully argued against his Arminian opponents.² If freedom requires being able to do otherwise, and God cannot do otherwise than will the good, then God is not free with respect to willing the good. But which claim should the theist give up? *Prima facie*, none of the three options is satisfactory to those who are libertarians. To deny (1) is to reject a version of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), a version which most libertarians regard as an essential component of their theory of freedom.³ To give up (2) is to claim that God does not possess the kind of freedom that is a necessary condition of moral responsibility, which entails that God is not a moral agent.⁴ But orthodox theism affirms that God *is* a moral agent: insofar as God is morally praiseworthy, it must be that He is morally responsible for His actions. To deny that God is morally praiseworthy would be to deny that He is maximally perfect and that He is a proper object of worship—conclusions no orthodox theist can abide.

Thus, the libertarian is led to question the truth of (3). But here she faces a dilemma. Divine goodness must be one of two types: either God is *essentially perfectly good*, meaning that God is perfectly good at every time in every possible world in which He exists, or God is *contingently perfectly good*, meaning that God is, as a matter of fact, perfectly good—that is, God is perfectly good in the actual world—but He fails to be so in other possible worlds.⁵ Proposition (3) claims the former, and orthodox theists generally feel hard pressed to retain this proposition, as relinquishing it seems immediately to confront one with a host of philosophical and theological problems.⁶ First,

²Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). See also “Jonathan Edwards on Divine and Human Freedom,” chapter 4 of William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford, New York, et. al.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54–73.

³The version of PAP considered here is different from the version Harry Frankfurt critiques in “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility” (*Journal of Philosophy*, 66 [1969]: 829–839). The version Frankfurt considers is the proposition that *moral responsibility* requires alternate possibilities, rather than the proposition that *freedom* requires alternate possibilities.

⁴The assumption that freedom is a necessary condition of moral responsibility is disputed by advocates of semi-compatibilism, but it seems fair to say that the majority consensus remains that freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. At any rate, I will assume this for present purposes.

⁵Various types (and degrees) of imperfect goodness are possible for some beings, of course, but the orthodox theist will consider none of these as genuine candidates for the type of goodness ascribed to God.

⁶One such worry—a common first reaction to the claim that God is contingently good—is misplaced: namely, that if God is merely contingently good, He might at any moment do something evil, and thus believers have no basis for placing absolute trust in Him. This worry is both irrelevant and confused. It is irrelevant, because orthodox theists on both sides of the debate about the nature of divine goodness agree that God is perfectly good at all times (past, present, and future) in the actual world; the present debate concerns whether there are merely possible worlds in which God does something evil. Put differently, the debate over whether Yahweh (or some other alleged divine being) is in fact evil is another issue altogether, and insofar as it is a genuine problem, it is one that burdens proponents of divine essential goodness and proponents of divine contingent goodness equally. The worry

it seems intuitively plausible that a being who does evil in some possible world is less perfect than a being who wills only the good in every possible world, in which case a contingently good being is not the greatest possible being—i.e., it seems that a contingently good being is not maximally perfect. Second, many would consider the property of being essentially good to be a conceptual requirement of being God. If so, then any being who does evil in any possible world is, of metaphysical necessity, not truly God. For such reasons, theists have felt led, more or less en masse, to the view that God is essentially perfectly good. Yet, as we have seen, the libertarian who endorses this claim—given that she also endorses PAP—is caught in a contradiction. How, then, is the libertarian to resolve this difficulty?

In the next section, I will present a possible solution to this problem—one that seems to me the best response available to those theists who are unwilling to relinquish or mitigate PAP. The view is broadly Molinist in its orientation, relying crucially on the assumption that there are some true counterfactuals of freedom, which will make it unpalatable to some libertarians. I will not here defend the view that there are some true counterfactuals of freedom, but rather attempt to show that, if one is willing to accept this Molinist starting point, a satisfying solution to the problem of divine goodness and freedom presents itself.

I. A Broadly Molinist Solution to the Problem

The Molinist discussion of counterfactuals of freedom typically focuses on those counterfactuals that apply to creatures. The basic claim is that propositions of the form

If P were in C , P would freely choose to do A ,

can be true, where P refers to some agent,⁷ C to some possible but unactual circumstance, and A to some action. There are well-known applications of this assumption by Molinists, including attempts to construct solutions to the problem of evil⁸ and to the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge (and/or sovereignty) with human freedom.⁹ Once one has accepted

is confused, as well, because it suggests that the believer's absolute trust in God is misplaced on the grounds that God's status as a perfect moral agent might *change* abruptly, upon God's suddenly deciding to do something evil. But given divine foreknowledge, God's moral status cannot change in any world. If God wills evil at any time in a world W , He has known from eternity past in W that He would will evil at that time. But the intention to will evil at a future time is itself evil. Thus God's moral status does not change in W at the moment that He actually wills the evil action. In W , God is *eternally* less than perfectly good. On this point, see Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 56–59.

⁷More precisely, P refers to the instantiation of some individual essence. This allows the Molinist to avoid the inclusion of possible but unactual beings in her ontology.

⁸See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom," chapter IX of *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, New York, et. al.: Oxford University Press, 1974), 164–195.

⁹See, for example, William Lane Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Dowers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 119–159.

the basic assumption of the possibility of true counterfactuals of freedom, however, there is no apparent reason to limit the scope of their reference to creatures. If there are true counterfactuals of freedom, then it would seem that some of them are propositions about what God would freely do in other possible but unactual circumstances.

To see the relevance of this point to the problem of divine freedom, consider first the use that Alvin Plantinga makes of counterfactuals of freedom in his Free Will Defense. To demonstrate the logical compatibility of God and evil, Plantinga argues that the proposition that all creaturely essences are transworldly depraved is possibly true. He defines the concept of transworld depravity as follows:

An essence *E* suffers from transworld depravity if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* entails the properties is significantly free in *W* and always does what is right in *W*, there is a state of affairs *T* and an action *A* such that

- (1) *T* is the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes in *W*,
 - (2) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in *W*,
- and
- (3) if God had strongly actualized *T*, *E*'s instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.¹⁰

The basic idea is this.¹¹ An essence *E* is transworldly depraved if it is such that, in every possible world *W* that God could have weakly actualized in which *E* is instantiated and in which the instantiation of *E* in *W* performs morally significant actions, the instantiation of *E* goes wrong with respect to at least one of these actions. Even though there are possible worlds in which the instantiation of a transworldly depraved essence always chooses right, none of these worlds can be actualized (neither strongly nor weakly) by God.¹² Such a world could be actualized only if the instantiation of the essence would freely choose to go right on every occasion of being faced with a morally significant decision. So if every creaturely es-

¹⁰Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 188. Plantinga characterizes strong actualization as follows: "In the strong sense, God can actualize only what he can *cause* to be actual; in that sense he cannot actualize any state of affairs including the existence of creatures who freely take some action or other" (*ibid.*, 173). He then distinguishes this from weak actualization: "What is at issue is not the question whether each world is such that God could have actualized it in the *strong* sense, but (roughly) whether for each world *W* there is something he could have done—some series of actions he could have taken—such that if he had, *W* would have been actual" (*ibid.*).

¹¹This paragraph is adopted from my "On Transworld Depravity and the Heart of the Free Will Defense," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006): 154.

¹²God cannot *strongly* actualize such worlds, because strongly actualizing a complete world violates the freedom of the creatures in that world (and thus the resulting world would not be one containing *free* creatures). He cannot *weakly* actualize such worlds, because the weak actualization of a morally perfect world requires the "cooperation" of the free agents in that world, and if every creaturely essence is transworldly depraved, then, no matter which essences are instantiated in the state of affairs God chooses to strongly actualize, the resulting agents will not cooperate to actualize a morally perfect world.

sence is transworldly depraved, God cannot actualize any world containing free creatures but no evil, even though He is omnipotent.

If the concept of transworld depravity is coherent,¹³ it suggests a parallel concept that is of significant interest to the libertarian in addressing the problem of divine freedom. We could label the concept “transworld goodness,” and define it as follows:

An essence *E* enjoys transworld goodness if and only if for every world *W* and every state of affairs *T* that *W* includes, if

- (1) *E* entails the property *is significantly free in W*, and
- (2) *T* includes *E*'s instantiation's facing a choice about whether to perform action *A* but does not include *E*'s instantiation's making a choice, and
- (3) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in *W*,

then

- (4) if *T* were actual, *E*'s instantiation would have willed the good with respect to *A*.

An essence *E* is transworldly good if it is such that, in every possible scenario *T* in which *E* is instantiated and in which the instantiation of *E* faces a morally significant action, the instantiation of *E* would have willed the good in that scenario if it were actual. Even though there are possible states of affairs in which the instantiation of a transworldly good essence does not will the good, none of these states of affairs would, in fact, be actualized by the free choice of a transworldly good being, were that being given the choice. A world in which such a being does evil could be actualized only if that being would freely choose not to will the good on some occasion of being faced with a morally significant decision. But the instantiation of a transworldly good essence would not, *as a matter of fact*, make such a choice. I stress “as a matter of fact,” because the claim being made here concerns counterfactuals of freedom, which are contingent. If *E* is an essence that possesses transworld goodness, then it is contingently true that, for any circumstance *T* that includes the instantiation of *E* facing a morally significant choice, if *T* were actual, the instantiation of *E* would (freely) choose to will the good.

Recall now the dilemma for the theological libertarian discussed in section I: either God is contingently perfectly good or He is essentially perfectly good, and both options lead to theological difficulties. The significance of the concept of transworld goodness is that it allows a way between the horns of the dilemma: one may hold that *the divine essence enjoys transworld goodness*. On the proposed view, God is contingently perfectly good. However, the variety of contingent goodness here being ascribed

¹³I argue, in the essay mentioned in footnote 11, that it is coherent.

to God is *better than*—in the sense of *theologically preferable to*—“bare” contingent goodness, and it is in this sense that it provides a solution to the dilemma. The concept of transworld goodness allows Molinists, at least, to embrace the first horn of the dilemma without being impaled.

To see this, consider what many orthodox theists want to say about God: that He *could* do evil (because He is omnipotent) but He *wouldn't* ever do anything evil (because He is perfectly good). Note that this claim is stronger than the claim that God could do evil but *won't*. The latter is a claim only about the actual world: it says that there are possible worlds in which God does evil (because He *could* do so, and a being's having the ability to perform some action requires, minimally, that there is a possible world in which the being performs that action)¹⁴ but that the actual world is not one of these worlds. This claim is too weak to capture the orthodox theist's intuitions about the magnitude of the goodness of God. Such theists want to claim not only that God never has done (and never will do) anything evil, but also that He never *would* do such a thing. The latter is a modal claim, a claim not only about the actual world but also about merely possible worlds. The concept of transworld goodness allows the theist to express, in technical terms, this commonsense theological intuition, without going so far as to claim that God lacks the ability to do evil. To say that the divine essence enjoys transworld goodness is to say that God would never, under any circumstances, do such a thing as perform an evil action, even though it is (necessarily) within His power to do so.

It is worth emphasizing that the solution just outlined does not require the assumptions of a full-fledged Molinism, but only the minimal claim that there are true counterfactuals of freedom. I suspect that, these days, the number of philosophers who accept Molinism is nearly as great as the number of libertarians who accept this minimal claim, and it is for this reason that I have called this solution a broadly Molinist one. Those willing to adopt the minimal claim but not a full-fledged Molinism will perhaps forgive me this terminological imprecision.

¹⁴This principle is somewhat controversial. Thomas Talbott defends the remarkable thesis that certain beings—including God and perfected saints—have it within their power to perform actions that it is logically impossible for them to perform. See “On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (Jan. 1988): 3–24. Though I would not go so far as Rowe, who considers Talbott's view “an instance of ‘language gone on holiday’” (*Can God Be Free?*, 149), I cannot fathom how Talbott's thesis could be true. Since the range of possible worlds exhausts the range of what is broadly logically possible, if there is no world in which an agent performs some action, then it is not possible for the agent to perform that action. But it seems to me self-evident that no being, not even God, has it within its power to do something that it is impossible for that being to do. Thus, I conclude that a necessary (though of course not sufficient) condition of an agent's being able to perform some action is that there exists a possible world in which the agent performs the action. In Talbott's defense, though, I have not here given an argument against his position; I have simply reported my intuition that a certain proposition strikes me as self-evident.

II. Some Objections

Does appeal to the concept of transworld goodness allow a Molinist (and anyone else who accepts the possibility of true counterfactuals of freedom) to successfully resolve the problem of divine freedom? In what follows I will attempt to answer this by way of assessing what I take to be the most important objections to the solution that I have sketched. I will argue that, in each case, a Molinist can meet the objection decisively. The first two objections will be presented together, as they are variations of one another.

Objection 1: It follows from the Molinist solution that there are possible worlds in which God does evil. But this is incoherent. Being perfectly good is a *conceptual requirement* of being God. Thus, any being who does evil in some possible world *W* at some time *t* does not meet the qualifications for being God in that world at that time. And since everything is what it is essentially, any being that is not God at some time in *W* is not God at any time in *W*.¹⁵ So there is no possible world in which some being possesses both the property of being less than perfectly good at some time and the property of being God; a fortiori, there is no possible world in which God does evil.

Objection 2: It follows from the Molinist solution that there are possible worlds in which God does evil. But this is incoherent. Being perfectly good is an *essential property* of (the being who is in fact) God. Were God suddenly to lack this property, He would thereby cease to exist, which is impossible. So there is no possible world in which God does evil. If God exists, He is perfectly good in every world in which He exists¹⁶—i.e., He is essentially good.

Response to Objections 1 and 2: As mentioned above, these are variations of the same critique. Objection 1 presents the de dicto version of the critique, while Objection 2 presents it in its de re form. Accordingly, the response to both objections is the same: they are question-begging. Precisely what is in question in the view under discussion is whether God is essentially good, so it will not do simply to insist that God is essentially good. Yet this is what each of the above objections does. Objection 1 does so by including the property of being perfectly good among the conceptual requirements of being God; Objection 2 does so by including the property in the divine essence (which is presumed to be instantiated in the actual world). Of course, it may be *true* that being perfectly good is a conceptual requirement of being God and/or an essential property of (the being who is in fact) God. But simply to insist on this is to reject the view under discussion without giving any argument against it.

Objection 3: According to the Molinist view under discussion, there are possible worlds in which God does evil. But this is incompatible with

¹⁵By the same reasoning, such a being is not God at any time in *any* world. Given that everything is what it is essentially, if a being is not God in *W*, then it *could not* be God—i.e., there is no possible world in which that being is God.

¹⁶This does not imply that there are worlds in which God does not exist.

perfect being theology. To see this, compare two beings, *P* and *Q*. Both beings are such that, for every great-making property *x*, both possess *x* in *x*'s quantitatively maximal form.¹⁷ Furthermore, with the exception of perfect goodness, *P* and *Q* both possess every such great-making quality in every world in which they exist. The only salient difference between *P* and *Q* with respect to their greatness is this: *P* is perfectly good in every possible world, whereas *Q* does evil in some possible but unactual world. It seems that *Q* is a being than which a greater is possible (in Anselm's terms: a being-than-which-a-greater-can-be-conceived); in fact, it seems clear that *P* is such a being. Thus, if God is merely contingently good, then it is possible that there exists a being that is greater than God. But this is incoherent: God is, of logical necessity, the greatest possible being. So there is no possible world in which God does evil.

Response to Objection 3: This objection is not question-begging, but there are reasons to reject it, nonetheless. One might, of course, reject it on the grounds that one rejects the perfect being theology that motivates it. But another, more satisfying response is available to the Molinist: she can argue that a transworldly good being is *better than* an essentially good being. The strategy for making such a case is straightforward: the Molinist first argues that essential goodness is logically incompatible with freedom (with respect to willing the good), which, in turn, entails that an essentially good being is neither morally responsible nor morally praiseworthy.¹⁸ The Molinist then presents us with two candidates for the greatest possible being: *P* is essentially perfectly good but not morally praiseworthy, *Q* is transworldly good and morally praiseworthy, and both beings possess maximal forms of every other great-making property. The Molinist then argues that, among the logically possible candidates, the greatest possible being is *Q*: a being who is "merely" transworldly good.

How successful is this strategy? Its success depends, first, on whether the initial argument for the incompatibility of divine essential goodness and freedom is compelling. One obvious way to challenge this argument is to embrace compatibilism with respect to divine freedom. The libertarian, of course, will reject this as pseudo-freedom, but—in addition to rehearsing the standard anti-compatibilist arguments—she also can note that the argument can be reframed to accommodate the assumption that freedom and determinism are logically compatible. If they are, then the two candidates for greatest possible being are *P*, a being who is essentially good but "merely" compatibilistically free (and who possesses maximal forms of all other great-making properties), and *Q*, a being who is

¹⁷This may be an impossible state of affairs. Most would contend that power is a great-making quality, and omnipotence is its maximal form, but it is doubtful that two beings both could be omnipotent in the same world. If not, let *P* and *Q* possess the maximal form of every great-making quality that it is possible for both to have. For present purposes, this will suffice.

¹⁸This is the argument discussed in section I.

incompatibilistically free but “merely” transworldly good (and who possesses maximal forms of all other great-making properties). Molinists can go on to argue that, even if compatibilistic freedom is possible, possessing incompatibilistic freedom is a superior great-making property in comparison to possessing compatibilistic freedom, and thus, among the options, the incompatibilistically free / transworldly good being is superior to the compatibilistically free / essentially good being—and thus *Q* is the greatest possible being.¹⁹ For this to be convincing, however, one must find it intuitively obvious that lacking incompatibilistic freedom in the actual world is worse than lacking perfect goodness in some merely possible world. But many theists will concede this: in particular, those who advocate the solution of transworld goodness will. For such theists, Objection 3 will not be compelling.

Objection 4: A transworldly good being is a being such that, for every possible circumstance *T*, if *T* were actual, that being would will the good in *T*. But, when combined with God’s other attributes, divine transworld goodness turns out to be identical to “standard” divine contingent goodness. Transworld goodness is distinct from “standard” contingent goodness only for a being who can find itself in different possible circumstances, which God cannot. To see this, consider the following. Orthodox theists hold that God is the creator of the world, and those philosophically minded among this group would add that, necessarily, in every possible world *W*, God weakly actualizes *W*—i.e., God is the creator of whatever exists contingently in *W* and He brings about everything that can be brought about in *W* without violating the freedom of the free creatures who exist in *W*. In every possible world, there is a “moment” logically prior to creation in which God decides which world to actualize. For the sake of simplicity, let us speak of God as “deliberating” about which world to actualize in this moment,²⁰ and let *C* denote this state of affairs. The problem is this. Given the assumption of counterfactuals of divine freedom, there is a fact of the matter about what God would freely choose in *C*. Given divine transworld goodness, the fact of the matter is that God would choose to will the good in *C*. But God’s act of creation is all-encompassing, meaning (among other things) that every future circumstance in which God faces a morally significant choice is one that God Himself chooses to weakly actualize in *C*. Thus, God as a transworldly good being really is no different than God as a “standard” contingently good being: each is a being who wills the good in *C* in the actual world—thereby determining every future circumstance that He will find Himself in—and fails to will the good (to various degrees) in *C* in other possible worlds. Insofar as “mere” divine contingent goodness is theologically unacceptable, divine transworld

¹⁹Again, it is being assumed that *P* and *Q* possess the maximal form of every other great-making property.

²⁰The notion of divine deliberation, construed literally, is rendered problematic by the doctrines of divine foreknowledge as well as divine eternity, but speaking this way metaphorically makes the argument at hand a bit easier to follow, I hope.

goodness is unacceptable, as well. Predicating transworld goodness of the divine essence solves nothing.

Response to Objection 4: This objection conflates two different issues. One is the issue of whether God can do evil—the issue of the present essay. The other is the issue of whether God must, of metaphysical necessity, will the best. Nothing in the Molinist solution under discussion requires that there is a (single) best possible world for God to weakly actualize; a fortiori, it does not require that God must actualize the best possible world. Divine transworld goodness requires, first, that God chooses a morally good course of action in *C*—presumably, this means that God chooses to weakly actualize a good world—and, second, that no matter which (good) world He had chosen to actualize, He would have chosen to will the good in that world every time He faced a morally significant choice. There is, of course, a fact of the matter about what God chooses in *C* in the actual world. But there are (presumably) other decisions that God could have made in *C* that would have been consistent with His transworld goodness: God's willing the good is consistent with His willing any number of different actions. Thus, the distinction between divine transworld goodness and "standard" divine contingent goodness, necessary to sustain the Molinist view under discussion, remains intact. The claim that God is transworldly good is stronger than the claim that God is contingently good: the former entails the latter, but not vice-versa.

Objection 5: The Molinist view under discussion faces a dilemma when forced to specify whether the counterfactuals of divine freedom (CDFs) are prevolitional or postvolitional. The issue is whether the truth values of the CDFs are up to God—that is, whether their truth values are logically prior to any divine act of will. If so—that is, if the CDFs are prevolitional—then God is not responsible for their truth values, even though the CDFs are contingent. Nothing in God's nature grounds their truth values, for in this case they would be necessary. So on the assumption that the CDFs are prevolitional, it seems that it is just a matter of luck that God is transworldly good. But this is clearly inconsistent with the idea of God as maximally perfect. Surely the extent of God's goodness cannot be a strange sort of moral luck, for in this case it would contribute nothing to his greatness or perfection. The Molinist is thus pushed to the conclusion that the CDFs are postvolitional: their truth values are determined by some divine act of will. On this view, there is some moment (logical moment, at least) at which the truth values of the CDFs are unsettled, and a later moment at which God somehow settles them—a moment in which He freely chooses to confer upon Himself the property of transworld goodness. In this case, it is not a matter of luck that God possesses transworld goodness, but the Molinist instead faces a different problem, one which pertains to God's moral status at the moment prior to when He makes His choice to give himself this property. The troublesome issue for the Molinist is whether, at this moment, God is perfectly good or not. The Molinist surely wants

to claim that He is,²¹ and she will want to further claim that His decision to confer upon himself the property of transworld goodness is a reflection of this and not the result of some arbitrary decision or whim. But if God is perfectly good even prior to His decision to give Himself transworld goodness, then at this moment of decision, God lacks any desire or inclination to choose evil—or even to choose that He *would* do evil in certain counterfactual scenarios. It appears, then, that God's choice to confer upon Himself transworld goodness is not free, but rather determined by His own nature—in particular, the motivational structure that comes with being perfectly good. But if God is not free in choosing to be transworldly good, then He is not praiseworthy for His transworld goodness, in which case, the whole point of the Molinist project under discussion is undermined.²²

This final objection is the one I regard as the most serious, and for this reason I will devote the most space to it. It seems to me that this objection contains a terminological confusion, and once this confusion is cleared up, a false dichotomy is revealed. In response to the question of whether the CDFs are prevolitional or postvolitional, classical Molinists—those following the lead of Molina himself—opt for the latter: the CDFs are postvolitional.²³ On their view, divine creation extends not only to settling the question of which world God will weakly actualize, but also the question of which world God *would have* weakly actualized if the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom had been different. As Thomas Flint puts it, “His single act of will, then, makes infinitely many counterfactuals of divine freedom true.”²⁴ It seem to me, however, that part of the motivation of the classical Molinist view at this point is the assumption that God is essentially perfectly good. If God is “merely” transworldly good, then adopting this line will lead to trouble—precisely the trouble described in the foregoing objection.

Is the advocate of transworld goodness, then, pushed to the view that the CDFs are prevolitional? In fact, she is not. But this is where the terminological confusion needs to be cleared up. In the preceding objection, “prevolitional” was characterized as meaning “not up to God” and “logically prior to any divine act of will.” This is a natural way of characterizing “prevolitional,” because it aptly describes God's relationship to the counterfactuals of *creaturely* freedom. Their truth values are settled logically prior to God's creative choice, and there is nothing that God can do about

²¹Note that this is not to claim that God is essentially perfectly good, but only that there is no moment—logical “moments” included—at which God is not perfectly good in the actual world.

²²I am indebted to Wes Morriston for developing this objection in his commentary on an earlier draft of this paper presented at the 2009 Central APA meeting.

²³See Louis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, ed. and trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 173–175, disputation 52, section 13. For commentary on this part of Molina's view, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 55–57.

²⁴Flint, *Divine Providence*, 57.

them—i.e., there is nothing God could do such that, were He to do it, their truth values would be different. But when we turn to God's relationship to the counterfactuals of *divine* freedom, it becomes clear that "not up to God" and "logically prior to any divine act of will" denote separate—and separable—properties.

The easiest way to see this is to think about the relationship of creatures to counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (CCFs). Suppose that $C \rightarrow A$ is a true CCF; it describes which action an agent S would freely choose to perform if some circumstance C were actual. What relationship does S bear to this CCF? Is it prevolitional for S , or postvolitional for S ? On the standard Molinist account, it is postvolitional, and this is so even though its truth value is logically prior (in fact also temporally prior) to any volitional act of S . Though S does not make or cause it to be true that $C \rightarrow A$,²⁵ nevertheless this CCF is postvolitional for S because it is still "up to S " in the relevant sense: namely, S has counterfactual control over it. That is to say, there is something that S could do such that, were S to do it, $C \rightarrow A$ would be false. By contrast, a certain counterfactual of freedom is prevolitional for an agent S just in case S possesses no such counterfactual control over it.²⁶

What I want to suggest is that the proponent of transworld goodness should regard God's relation to the CDFs as being much like a creature's relation to the set of CCFs that are "about" that creature (with the obvious exception that the CDFs do not preexist God). The truth values of the CDFs are logically prior to any divine act of will, such that God does not make or cause them to be true, but they are nevertheless up to God in the aforementioned sense: God possesses counterfactual control over them. Thus the CDFs are postvolitional for God. But they are not postvolitional in the sense that the classical Molinist claims—they are not settled by God in a single creative act of will—which is what allows the proponent of transworld goodness to avoid the aforementioned objection.

But in this case, is not the view under discussion vulnerable to the same objection that was raised against the prevolitional view? Recall that the critic's principal objection to the prevolitional view is that it renders it a matter of *luck* that God possesses transworld goodness, in which case, God is not praiseworthy for it. This might seem also to follow from the solution I have suggested: that the CDFs are logically prior to, and thus not the result of, any divine act. The critic reasons that, unless transworld goodness is entailed by features of God's nature (in which case it would be an *essential* property of God rather than a contingent one), it just *happens to be* that God possesses transworld goodness. Thus the dilemma: God's possession of transworld goodness is either necessary, in which case the view collapses into the doctrine of divine essential goodness, or it is a matter of luck.

I think this dilemma is a false one, and in much the same way as the (in)famous dilemma of determinism. Compatibilists often insist that libertarian

²⁵Ibid., 123–124.

²⁶I am grateful to Tom Flint for helping me to get clear about this point.

freedom reduces to randomness on the grounds that there is no sufficient explanation for a (supposed) libertarian free choice, but as libertarians often point out, this response to libertarianism is question-begging: it simply assumes that every non-random event can be adequately explained, and that the only adequate explanation of an event is one for which a sufficient reason can be given.²⁷ Precisely what libertarians hold is that a free choice, initiated by an act of agent causation, is an event which is caused (by the agent) but not determined. The choice can be adequately explained in terms of the agent's reasons, character, etc., but all such explanations will fall short of providing a sufficient reason for the choice (because the agent could have chosen otherwise). Likewise, regarding the view I have suggested, the critic implicitly assumes that if there is no sufficient reason for God's possessing transworld goodness—such as we would have if transworld goodness were a part of God's essential nature—then it is a brute, inexplicable, lucky fact that God possesses it. But this is not so. God's possessing transworld goodness can be adequately explained in terms of God's character—by the fact that He is perfectly loving, just, knowledgeable, rational, etc.—so long as by “adequate” we are not demanding a *sufficient* explanation (in the technical sense of the term). God's being perfectly loving, etc. *makes it intelligible* why, if He had been in a different set of circumstances, He still would have willed the good. To point out that this fails to provide a sufficient explanation is irrelevant, given that the purpose of the project is to provide a solution to the problem of divine freedom on the assumption that a version of *libertarianism* (viz., Molinism) is true.²⁸ Note also that, by explaining the basis of divine transworld goodness in this way, it becomes clear why this is a property for which God can reasonably be praised. The fact (if it is such) that God is transworldly good says something about God's *character*. This, I think, is the intuition behind the ordinary theist's claim that God *would not* ever do anything evil. Compare with similar claims about human persons: “Smith is a good man; he would never tell a lie.” The claim, if true, says something significant about Smith—something for which Smith is morally praiseworthy. And likewise for God: if it is true of Him that He would not, under any circumstances, will something evil, then this says something about His character for which He is praiseworthy.

²⁷See, for example, C. A. Campbell's “Has the Self ‘Free Will’?” in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, Ninth Ed., ed. Joel Feinberg (Belmont, Albany, et al.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), 453–454.

²⁸Of course, the analogy to the dilemma of determinism is not perfect. In the case of libertarian free choices, there is something that we can “point to”—namely, the causal activity of the agent—which grounds the truth-values of propositions about the agent's choices. But what could we point to which grounds the truth value of the CDFs? I leave it to Molinists to answer this question, which is, of course, just the oft-rehearsed grounding objection to middle knowledge. My project here is to show that there is an adequate solution to the problem of divine freedom *on the assumption that Molinism is true*. It is not a part of my project to defend Molinism. I aim to show only that Molinists, to the extent that they have adequate responses to all the standard objections to Molinism, have available to them an adequate solution to the problem of divine freedom.

One final point: Some readers have expressed concern that my view does not seem to them substantially different from that defended by Nelson Pike.²⁹ I take it that there are important differences. For one, Pike's analysis treats "God" as a title rather than a proper name, an assumption which has important implications for the conclusions he draws: for example, that "God cannot sin" expresses a logically necessary truth. I have carried on the discussion primarily in terms of essences—specifically, the set of properties essential to the divine nature—and have worked under the assumption that *being God* is an essential property of the being who is in fact God.

Nevertheless, these readers may be right that there is substantial overlap between the Molinist view I have defended and Pike's view that "The individual that is God cannot sin in that sinning would be contrary to a firm and stable feature of his nature."³⁰ I myself am not sure how much Pike's view overlaps the one I have defended, because I do not understand the way Pike uses the terms "material" and "materially" in his essay, which seems necessary to make this judgment. He at times suggests that a material possibility is a "real" possibility, in contrast to a mere logical possibility.³¹ Elsewhere he suggests that "God cannot sin" might be interpreted so that "the 'cannot' in 'cannot sin' does not express logical impossibility" but rather "a material concept—that of a limitation of creative-power"; he contrasts this with another understanding in which "God cannot sin" is taken to mean "that although the individual that is God (Yahweh) has the ability (i.e., the creative power necessary) to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible, His own nature or character is such as to provide material assurance that He will not act in this way."³² He concludes that God's doing something evil is "logically possible but materially excluded."³³ I find this usage of "material" and its derivatives confusing; it apparently is not meant to denote the material implication of first-order logic (famous for its inadequacy in accounting for ordinary counterfactual reasoning). But then, what is it? One might take it that Pike is intending to express just the view that I have described in this paper: that God's character is such that He *would not*, as a matter of fact, will evil under any circumstance, even though He could. Those readers who interpret Pike this way should read my essay as offering a kind of analysis of Pike's suggestion: a way of understanding, in technical terms, the idea of *stability* or *firmness* of divine character to which Pike appeals, but does not explain.

III. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, further objections to the Molinist solution that I have sketched in this paper are possible, and proponents of this solution would

²⁹Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin."

³⁰Ibid., 82.

³¹Ibid., 68.

³²Ibid., 80–81.

³³Ibid., 82.

need to address these to make a decisive case for the view. Nevertheless, the aforementioned objections seem to me the most important ones, so I conclude, tentatively, that this solution provides one feasible way that the orthodox theist can successfully resolve the version of the problem of divine freedom addressed in this paper.

Of course, the solution I have proposed is only as strong as its Molinist foundation, and this is a foundation rejected by a great many orthodox theists. As I mentioned previously, it is not a full-fledged Molinism that is needed for the solution defended in this paper, but only the minimal claim that there are true counterfactuals of freedom. Nevertheless, the grounding objection, which seems to be the most widely-cited reason for rejecting Molinism, targets just this claim. Those who find this objection compelling will not regard transworld goodness as a viable solution, even if the present discussion has convinced them that it would be *if* counterfactuals of freedom could be true.

In fact, the solution I have defended will be judged unacceptable even by many Molinists. I have nowhere claimed that Molinists must accept the doctrine of transworld goodness, either in the sense that transworld goodness is entailed by Molinism or that Molinists have no other viable options. The solution developed here is one option for Molinists—and anyone else who might accept the view that there are true counterfactuals of freedom—but it remains open to them to reject it in favor of another solution. Many theists, Molinist and non-Molinist alike, will no doubt reject this solution on the grounds that they have a strong intuition that being perfectly good is an essential property of God and/or a conceptual requirement of being God. The response to Objections 1 and 2 in the previous section discussed why appeal to this intuition does not undercut the view that God is transworldly good (to review: insisting on the truth of this intuition is question-begging against the proponent of divine transworld goodness). Nevertheless, those who have this intuition are within their epistemic rights to reject the view that God is merely transworldly good. Or, at any rate, theists who have this intuition are within their rights to do so *if* they are willing to reject (1). I have elsewhere developed what I take to be the best solution to the problem of divine freedom for those theists, like myself, who are unwilling to relinquish the doctrine of divine essential goodness.³⁴ But I remain convinced that the solution developed in the present paper is viable *if* Molinism is viable, and that this is the best solution available to those who are unwilling to relinquish or mitigate the Principle of Alternate Possibilities.³⁵

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³⁴R. Zachary Manis, "On Divine Essential Goodness and the Nature of Divine Freedom," unpublished manuscript.

³⁵I am indebted to Bill Rowe, Wes Morrison, and Tom Flint for helpful critiques and stimulating discussion of earlier drafts of this paper.