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Some Remarks on Neo-Molinism, Infinite Intelligence, and Providence

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the alleged providential utility of the neo-Molinist account of divine providence (via Gregory Boyd’s infinite intelligence argument) doesn’t work. Contrary to what Boyd avers it is not the case that God, given openness assumptions, can prepare for every possibility as effectively as if he were certain such possibilities were going to occur. Nor is it the case that he could be guaranteed, even in principle, that his ultimate purposes for creation would be fulfilled when those purposes depend on the decisions of libertarian free creatures. I conclude, therefore, that a God who has infallible foreknowledge of what his creatures will freely do—as would be the case on a Molinist or a simple-foreknowledge account—has a clear advantage and is preferable, providentially speaking, to the God of neo-Molinism.

Introduction

In recent years, a debate has been rekindled among theologians and philosophers of religion over the question of whether God could, in principle, know what a free agent would or would not do on any particular occasion. Among those who answer this question affirmatively are Molinists.¹ Specifically, Molinists claim that for any possible agent S and circumstance C that God might choose to instantiate, God knew, logically *prior* to his decision to create, that were S in C , S would freely do act A (or, as the case may be, would not do A). That God has “middle knowledge” of such

¹ So named after the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit theologian, Luis de Molina (1535-1600).

counterfactuals of creaturely freedom—or, for brevity, CCFs—is an assumption upon which the entire Molinist theory of providence depends.²

Others, however, don't share this assumption. One problem in particular with the Molinist conception of CCFs, they say, is that it is not altogether clear how God could know these subjunctive conditionals given the kind of freedom they presuppose. After all, conditionals of this sort are supposed to be about the libertarian, and therefore *indeterministic*, free actions of persons. But if the circumstances in which *S* chooses to do *A* are non-determining—as they must be if *S*'s choice is to be considered free—then nothing about the laws of nature or the state of the world leading up to the moment of *S*'s decision will be sufficient to guarantee that *S* chooses *A* rather than not-*A*. As Anthony Kenny notes, “for an indeterminist, points in any story where a free choice is made are precisely points where the story has two different and equally coherent continuations.”³ Thus a question naturally arises: What indication could God have, prior to *S*'s actual decision, that *S* would choose *this* way rather than *that* way?⁴ While not absolutely decisive

² More specifically, Molina's theory was that, in addition to God's natural knowledge of everything that *could* be, and his free knowledge of all contingent truths that *will* be, God possesses “middle knowledge”—i.e., hypothetical knowledge of what, if he were to actualize a particular world, *would* be. On this picture, such knowledge is thought to be pre-volitional since, like God's natural knowledge, it occurs logically prior to his decision to create. But unlike his natural knowledge, which includes within its scope all *necessary* truths, the content of God's middle knowledge is *contingent*. Indeed, it was the great theological innovation of Molina to locate facts about what creatures would freely do in any circumstance—so-called *counterfactuals of freedom*—among the set of contingent truths that combine to comprise God's middle knowledge. Though he has no control over what counterfactual conditionals are true, the idea was that, by conceiving of God's hypothetical knowledge of creaturely free decisions as being explanatorily *prior* to his creative decree, God would be in a position to plan and thereby meticulously govern a world that is, nevertheless, populated by libertarian free agents.

³ Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 68.

⁴ A related worry has always been the question of what could explain or *ground* the truth of these conditionals. Such truths cannot be accounted for by appealing to God's will, for instance, since to do so would amount to theological determinism, something Molinists want to avoid. Nor would it seem that they could be made true by the actual decisions of the agents themselves; for CCFs are about *non-actual* persons, persons who do not yet exist (and in many cases will *never* exist). In the absence of any other candidates, however, it looks as if

against the Molinist position, worries like this have proven serious enough that it has seemed to a growing number of philosophers that what is true (and hence knowable) prior to God's creative decree is not that *S* would or would not do *A* in *C* but, rather, that *S* *might* or *might not* do *A* in *C*.

One of the more interesting proposals to emerge along these lines has been a version of open theism called neo-Molinism.⁵ According to the neo-Molinist, when it comes to the free actions of agents, God's middle knowledge cannot be assumed to pertain solely to what these agents would or would not do since such propositions—being *contraries* rather than *contradictories*—do not exhaust the range of possibilities. As I've discussed elsewhere,⁶ on the standard counterfactual semantics employed by many Molinists, the contradictory of "*S* would do *A* in *C*" is not "*S* would not do *A* in *C*" but "*S* might not do *A* in *C*." Similarly, "*S* would not do *A* in *C*" is contradicted by "*S* might do *A* in *C*." Upon this basis the neo-Molinist goes on to insist that there is a logically distinct class of conjointly true "might and might not" propositions among the content of God's middle knowledge. That is, if it is true that *S* might do *A* in *C* and it is also true that *S* might not do *A* in *C*, then it is false that *S* would do *A* in *C* and, likewise, false that *S* would not do *A* in *C*. In other words, if *S* is genuinely free with respect to doing *A* under the circumstances in question, then there is a conjointly true "might and might not" conditional that represents this state of affairs (i.e., "If *S* were in *C*, *S*

we are left with an unappealing conclusion, namely that *nothing* grounds these truths. This is, of course, the (in)famous "grounding problem." For a detailed and more formal articulation of this particular objection, see Alexander Zambrano, "Truthmaker and the Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge," *Aporia* 21 (2011): 19-34; and William Hasker, "Counterfactuals and Evil: A Final Reply to R. Douglas Geivett," *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003): 237-40. For a sampling of Molinist responses to the grounding objection, see especially Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), chap. 5; William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the Grounding Objection," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 337-52; and Edward Wierenga, "Providence, Middle Knowledge, and the Grounding Objection," *Philosophia Christi* 3 (2001): 447-57.

⁵ The primary architect of this view (and the one responsible for its title) is Gregory A. Boyd. See Boyd, "Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God," *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003): 187-204.

⁶ Elijah Hess, "Arguing from Molinism to Neo-Molinism," *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 331-51.

might and might not do A ”), a conditional that negates both corresponding “would” and “would not” conditionals with the same antecedent. Supposing that God actualizes a world with persons capable of free choice, then, the resultant indeterminacy that obtains in God’s middle knowledge from granting such a capacity would carry over into God’s free knowledge as well. Among other things, the neo-Molinist argues, this would mean that the future is epistemically open for God.⁷ In contrast to what the majority of Christian theists have supposed, therefore, given the neo-Molinist’s framework, God would not know whether S is going to do A or not- A in advance of S ’s decision—he would only know that S might or might not do A .

But here we come to an obvious worry: If God doesn’t infallibly know what we are going to do on certain occasions, isn’t his ability to act providentially in the world diminished? Indeed critics of the open view often worry that, were the future open in the way that neo-Molinists and other open theists suppose, God’s ultimate purposes for the cosmos could potentially be thwarted. As William Lane Craig puts it, “Knowledge of mere ‘might’ counterfactuals is insufficient to give God the sort of specific providential control described in the Bible. Nor is it clear that such knowledge is sufficient to bring about God’s desired ends.”⁸ Similarly, Bruce Ware wonders whether, given openness presuppositions, “a believer [can] know that God will triumph in the future just as he promised he will.”⁹

Gregory Boyd, however, demurs. As a prominent open theist—and the foremost advocate of neo-Molinism today—Boyd has vigorously sought to blunt the force of such critiques. He writes,

⁷ As Alan Rhoda defines it, the future is *epistemically open* at time t if and only if for some state of affairs X and some future time t^* neither “ X will obtain at t^* ” nor “ X will not obtain at t^* ” (nor their tense-neutral counterparts) is infallibly known either (i) at t or (ii) timelessly. See Rhoda, “The Fivefold Openness of the Future,” in *God in an Open Universe: Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism*, ed. William Hasker, Thomas Jay Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 75.

⁸ William Lane Craig, “God Directs All Things: On Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence,” in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 90-1.

⁹ Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 216.

I believe that this criticism is completely without merit—at least if we grant that God is *infinitely intelligent*. If God’s intelligence has no limit, then he can perfectly anticipate, from all eternity, each and every possible decision free agents might ever make. Indeed, an infinitely intelligent God is as prepared for every one of any number of possible future events as he would be for a single future event that was certain to take place.¹⁰

“With no limit to his intelligence,” Boyd goes on to say, “God can anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility *as effectively as if it were a certainty*...It is evident, then, that the God of open theism knows the future just as effectively as the God of classical theism, who faces an eternally settled future.”¹¹

Is Infinite Intelligence Enough?

Though I was once sympathetic to the gesture, I’ve come to believe that the neo-Molinist’s case has been overstated here. Without further argument, the claim that there is no distinction to be made between possibilities and certainties in terms of providential advantage for the God of open theism is false. For while it’s true to say that God can perfectly envision any possibility, the problem is that Boyd goes further and says that God can be “as prepared for” any possible future event as he is for any certain future event. Here’s why that claim won’t work.

Suppose there are two possible indeterministic outcomes, *A* and *B*. Given openness assumptions, God does not know ahead of time which of these two outcomes will obtain. The neo-Molinist wants to say that God can nevertheless anticipate and be as prepared for *A* as he is for *B*. Moreover, Boyd thinks that “because of God’s infinite intelligence, it is irrelevant ‘when’ God knows what free agents would do in various situations...whether or not God is certain of what agents will do before they actually do it does not affect the perfection of God’s preparedness in response to what they do.”¹² On the neo-Molinist view, then, God is supposed to be thought of as being able to

¹⁰ Boyd, “God Limits His Control,” in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, 206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206-7 (my emphasis).

¹² Boyd, “Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God,” 199.

treat *A* as if it were certainly going to occur (and similarly for *B*).

But a moment's reflection will reveal that this can't be right. Contrary to what Boyd suggests, the time when God discovers which of these outcomes is going to obtain is not at all irrelevant to his level of providential preparedness. For it may be that the optimific response to each of these outcomes would require an element of activity that God would need to providentially implement *in advance* of their actual occurrence.¹³ And, what's more, these responses might be mutually incompatible. The optimific response in preparation for *A*, say, might be *X*. But, arguably, the optimific response in preparation for *B* could be not-*X*. Thus, while God could confidently do *X* in anticipation of *A* if he were certain that *A* was going to occur, he cannot prepare an optimal response to the mere possibility of *A*'s occurrence if he's uncertain about whether *B* will occur instead. In other words, he cannot act as if *A* and *B* were each the *only* outcome he had to worry about since he cannot implement both *X* and not-*X*.

To illustrate the point, I borrow an example from David Hunt. Imagine God is engaged in a game of rock-paper-scissors with Satan. He knows it's possible that Satan might play rock, paper, or scissors. Can God be as prepared for any of these options as if they were the only option God had to worry about? No. For suppose God wants to win this game against Satan. If he acts as if it is certain that Satan will play rock, then God—if he is going to act optimally—will play paper. But he can't treat the possibility of Satan playing rock as a certainty *and* treat the possibility of Satan playing scissors (or paper) as a certainty as well for the simple reason that he can't play both paper and rock. The optimific responses are mutually exclusive.

Now in the game just imagined there are, of course, three possible moves available to Satan. Thus God can't be guaranteed a win in this scenario

¹³ The practice of so-called "past-directed prayer" (PDP) serves as just one example where this may be the case. James Anderson defines a PDP as a prayer that petitions God either (i) to have brought about some state of affairs at some time in the past or (ii) to bring about some state of affairs (now or in the future) that would require God to have brought about some (other) state of affairs at some time in the past (<http://www.proginosko.com/2014/10/open-theism-and-past-directed-prayers/>). For a moving account of how at least one PDP appears to have been answered, see Helen Roseveare, *Living Faith: Willing to be Stirred as a Pot of Paint* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 56-8.

since it is a genuine possibility that his move, whatever it happens to be, will be defeated. Hence, in addition to serving as a counterexample to Boyd's claim that, with respect to providential planning, God can treat possibilities as if they were certainties, hypothetical situations such as this also show that the *time* at which God comes to know what a free choice is going to be can serve as a relevant factor in assessing the overall utility of his providential activity; whether God knows ahead of time what the result of an indeterministic process will be, therefore, may bear directly on the level of effectiveness with which he can respond.

What can be said in response? Well, as I pointed out in my earlier paper on behalf of the neo-Molinist,¹⁴ if we suppose that God is not willing to risk losing such a game then it may be that, from eternity past, he has opted to leave only *two* options open to Satan on this occasion. Such a response is in keeping with Boyd's idea that the parameters of creaturely freedom are set by God.¹⁵ By allowing Satan to play just rock or scissors for instance, God could have set things up in such a way so as to preserve Satan's freedom, on the one hand, while at the same time guaranteeing that he never actually loses.¹⁶ But, alas, what I realize now—and what I should have realized then—is that such an amendment is still inadequate to deliver the sorts of goods neo-Molinists like Boyd believe they can have on an infinite intelligence model of providence, namely, a guarantee that God will *win* in the end. Indeed Boyd is emphatic that God can guarantee, for example, that there will be a group of people who freely choose to enter into a loving relationship with him, for, as he rightly notes, "Scripture unequivocally depicts God as certain that he will have a people for himself, a bride."¹⁷ Quickly anticipating the inevitable objection, however, Boyd immediately writes "But if God did not predestine or at least foreknow that anyone in particular would accept his invitation, then, it might be argued, he simply could not be certain of this. It seems that God's goal for world history could fail and that Satan could win this conflict after all."¹⁸ Boyd offers

¹⁴ Hess, "Arguing from Molinism to Neo-Molinism."

¹⁵ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 156.

¹⁶ Hess, "Arguing from Molinism to Neo-Molinism," 336-7n13.

¹⁷ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 155.

¹⁸ Ibid.

two lines of response to this objection, both of which I believe can be seen to fail.

The first response Boyd gives to the objector who holds that the God of open theism cannot be certain that anyone will freely come to him involves the idea that, though God cannot be certain that any one *specific* individual will accept his love, he can nevertheless be statistically guaranteed at the macro level that a *group* of unspecified individuals will come to be saved. As he puts it,

“As Creator, [God] knows humans exhaustively, infinitely better than any human could ever know them. Now, if sociologists, advertisers, and insurance companies can accurately predict the behavior of large groups of people under certain conditions, though they are unable to predict the behavior of any particular individual within these groups, how much more should we assume that God is able to predict the behavior of large groups of people over long periods of time, that is, the whole human race throughout the whole of world history?”¹⁹

Boyd goes on to clarify that,

[W]e need not suppose that God had an exact or fixed knowledge of the percentage of people who would and would not respond to his offer of grace in the event that humans fell. That is, his knowledge of this group behavior may be a wave probability, and this wave probability might fluctuate due to various contingencies over time. The objection we are considering, however, is avoided so long as this fluctuating wave probability could never include zero.²⁰

The first problem with this line of response is that the ability to predict a group’s behavior with a great deal of accuracy is not equivalent to being infallibly *certain* that such behavior will occur. Sociologists, advertisers, and insurance companies sometimes make mistakes precisely because they, unlike God, are fallible knowers. Second, and more to the point, Boyd’s last sentence is simply false. The objection we are considering, after all, is that God—given

¹⁹ Ibid., 156.

²⁰ Ibid.

openness assumptions—cannot be certain that he will win against Satan. That is, God cannot be guaranteed that some people will ultimately resist the devil’s deceptions and come to accept Christ. For suppose that Satan’s “winning” of the rock-paper-scissors match represents the possibility that Satan succeeds in preventing any individuals from coming to the Lord. In other words, if Satan wins, no one is ultimately saved—if God wins, however, then some are saved. As mentioned above, if God is unwilling to accept the grim prospect that no one ultimately comes to him, he can ensure that he never actually loses to Satan by deciding to enter into a 2x2 game (two players, two options) rather than the 2x3 game (two players, three options) represented by the original rock-paper-scissors scenario. Again, by only leaving open to Satan the options of rock or scissors, God, in choosing to play rock, could guarantee that he won’t lose. But here’s the rub, *being guaranteed that one will not lose the game just described does not imply that one has thereby been guaranteed a win*. On the contrary, it may be that God, in choosing to play rock, simply “draws.” So even if he can guarantee that Satan never ultimately wins, it does not follow that God will emerge victorious in the sense advocated by Boyd. Indeed, God could be stuck in a tied match throughout eternity with Satan if the Prince of Darkness happened to freely choose rock every time they faced off.

This last point serves to rebut Boyd’s second response to the objection that God could not be certain that he will, in the end, have secured a people for himself if open theism is true. In addition to his claim that God can be statistically assured that at least some will be saved, Boyd suggests that, “the Lord could know from the start that he would certainly have a bride on the basis of his perfect knowledge of *his own character and ability*.”²¹ He argues,

As the biblical narrative testifies, [God] is the Lord of love who refuses to give up! Even if it were possible for entire generations completely to rebel against him, the Lord knew before he entered into this plan that he was willing to do whatever it took and to work for however long it might take to see his creation bear the fruit he was seeking. If he must delay consummating his plan to allow more people

²¹ Ibid.

to enter into his eternal kingdom, he is willing to do this (see 2 Pet. 3: 9-10).²²

At best, however, all the open theist can say here is that God is willing to grant an indefinite amount of opportunities for people to make salvation decisions should humanity have fallen. It may be thought that, given enough time, the likelihood that some will turn and be saved becomes increasingly great as we approach infinity. Still, even granting such an assumption, God could not *infallibly know* that some will eventually turn to him. For as Johannes Grössl and Leigh Vicens have recently argued,²³ if for every person *S* and salvation opportunity *O* that is afforded *S*, it is metaphysically possible that *S* either chooses to resist or submit to the Holy Spirit's call (given libertarian freedom), then it is metaphysically possible (however unlikely) that for every *S* and *O*, *S* chooses to resist the Holy Spirit. It therefore remains the case that God's purposes for the cosmos—to have a people for himself—*could* never be realized.

The openness proponent may object that this is a problem for every free-will theist, whether one is an open theist, Molinist, or simple-foreknowledge Arminian. On Molinism, for instance, the CCFs could have turned out such that no person in any circumstances in which they might be placed would freely accept Christ. If such a scenario obtained, there would be no feasible worlds for God to create in which his purposes are achieved. More radically, on the simple-foreknowledge view, God runs the risk of not knowing whether anyone will freely accept his offer of salvation until *after* he decides to create a world.

In response, I think it is important to note the following distinction. While it is true that God cannot *himself* guarantee that anyone freely chooses to repent and accept the gift of life on libertarian conceptions of salvation, in contrast to the open view, God can—at least theoretically—*be* guaranteed that some will be saved on both the Molinist and simple-foreknowledge scheme. If, for example, there *are* true CCFs that indicate some persons would accept Christ, then the Molinist God, in actualizing the circumstances specified in the

²² Ibid., 156-7.

²³ See Grössl and Vicens, “Closing the Door on Limited-Risk Open Theism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014): 475-85.

relevant counterfactual's antecedent, could come to know immediately upon his creative decree that he will have a people for himself. Similarly, on the simple-foreknowledge view, if upon creating the world *it turns out to be true* that some will freely accept his offer, God could come to know this immediately consequent to his creation and, thus, infallibly know all who will be saved ahead of time. Molinists and simple-foreknowledge Arminians can both affirm with confidence, then, that when John wrote of those who would one day come to worship before the Lord—individuals from every nation, tribe, people and language—the divine source of John's vision was capable of knowing this (Rev. 7:9). God, who is essentially omniscient, was able to infallibly know that all these people were eventually going to come to a saving knowledge of him because, apparently, this is what was true at the time of John's writing (Rev. 22:6). Since this sort of infallible foreknowledge is not even a theoretical possibility within open theism, it is difficult to see how Boyd's neo-Molinist position can account for passages such as this.

Conclusion

Though I remain convinced that the nature of libertarian freedom would likely preclude a traditional Molinist conception of middle knowledge, I've come to believe that the supposed providential utility the neo-Molinist view is often advertised to provide via the infinite intelligence argument doesn't work. Given openness assumptions, it is not the case that God can prepare for every possibility as effectively as if he were certain it was going to happen. Nor is it the case that he could be guaranteed, even in principle, that his ultimate purposes for creation would be fulfilled when those purposes depend on the decisions of libertarian free agents. It seems to me, therefore, that a God who has infallible foreknowledge of what his creatures will freely do has a clear advantage and is preferable, providentially speaking, to the God of neo-Molinism.

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