

## Is free-will theism religiously inadequate? A reply to Ciocchi

WILLIAM HASKER

*Department of Philosophy, Huntington College, Huntington, IN 46750*

**Abstract:** David Ciocchi has charged that ‘open’ or free-will theism is religiously inadequate. This is it is because it is unable to affirm the ‘presumption of divine intervention in response to petitionary prayer’ (PDI), a presumption Ciocchi claims is implicit in the religious practice of ordinary Christian believers. I argue that PDI and Ciocchi’s other assumptions concerning prayer are too strong, and would upon reflection be rejected by most believers. On the other hand, God as conceived by free-will theism has extensive resources for answering petitionary prayers, including prayers whose fulfilment depends on the free responses of other persons.

David Ciocchi has charged that ‘open’ or free-will theism is religiously inadequate.<sup>1</sup> This challenge is especially interesting, because he attacks free-will theism on a point its proponents have claimed as a strength, namely petitionary prayer. He does this by setting forth a proposition (PDI) he claims is implicit in the religious practice of ordinary Christian believers, and then arguing that free-will theism is unable to affirm this proposition. He also makes a serious and commendable effort to find replies that a free-will theist might make to his argument. He concedes that some of these replies are helpful to the free-will theist, though in the end he finds none of them satisfactory.

There is, however, a glaring omission in his presentation: nowhere does he examine carefully the question whether and how alternatives to free-will theism can meet the constraints he imposes. One might respond, on his behalf, that his paper concerns this one view only, and the examination of alternatives can well be left for another occasion. This response is unsatisfactory, because at a number of points throughout the paper he does make or imply comparisons between free-will theism and alternative positions, to the detriment of the former. But while free-will theism is subjected to careful critical analysis on this point, he is content to say that other theists who accept libertarian free will ‘support their outlook with arguments that range from appeals to mystery and paradox all the way to

sophisticated applications of the concept of middle knowledge' (47). Clearly, this matter needs to be examined more closely.

This reply will proceed in three main stages. First, I shall set out briefly Ciocchi's argument for the religious inadequacy of free-will theism. Then, I will examine the point just raised: are alternative views significantly better off? Finally, I will examine some replies to Ciocchi's argument, including some he has suggested himself.

### **The argument for religious inadequacy**

Foundational to Ciocchi's strategy is his assertion that 'a position is religiously adequate to the degree that it comports with the common beliefs and practices of ordinary believers' (47). I have no fundamental objection to this strategy; in fact I've used something very like it myself, in arguing the superiority of free-will theism over process theism.<sup>2</sup> But there are a couple of cautions that need to be observed. First, the 'ordinary believer', like the man on the street, can be a rather elusive fellow, even though we are all acquainted with a lot of examples of each! And this is particularly the case when one is not citing explicit beliefs but is rather eliciting propositions which are alleged to be implicit in religious practice. What one ordinary believer sees as a truism may seem altogether inadequate to a second, and to yet a third believer may seem a bold overstatement that presses the limits of credibility. The second caution is this: one would be courageous indeed (not to say foolhardy) to assume in advance that all of the propositions implicit in the practices of a given believer are logically consistent with one another. All of us tend to shift our assumptions around somewhat in response to the perceived needs of the moment, and it requires quite a lot of theological discipline to curb this tendency. Surely, then, the theological assumptions that are of most interest are those that remain *after* the process of sifting and checking for consistency has been completed. But with these reservations, we can proceed with the examination of Ciocchi's argument.

The assumption Ciocchi believes to be implicit in ordinary religious practice, and yet is unavailable to free-will theists, is the *presumption of divine intervention in response to petitionary prayer*, or PDI. According to Ciocchi, 'it is common for ordinary believers to hold not only that God can grant us our petitions, but also that He will grant them' (48). He qualifies this by saying that God can be expected to grant only *appropriate* petitions, which he explains as follows: 'For a prayer to be appropriate, both the petition and the petitioner must meet certain conditions. The petition must be for something consistent with God's purposes and values, and the petitioner must please God, especially by praying in faith with the intention of submitting to God's will' (46).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it is not assumed that *all* appropriate petitions will be granted by God. 'The "presumption" of the PDI has reference to God's normal response to appropriate prayer rather than to an

invariant divine practice. It allows the possibility that God will deny some petitions of appropriate prayer, but it makes those denials exceptional events' (49). In the light of these qualifications, we may state the PDI as follows:

PDI God can be expected to act in such a way that appropriate petitions will be granted in the majority of cases, though in exceptional cases God may, for good reasons of His own, refrain from granting even appropriate petitions.

In support of PDI, Ciocchi points to the severe 'test of faith' experienced by many believers when petitions that seem to be appropriate are not granted. The struggles of these believers are difficult to make sense of, he thinks, unless something like PDI is implicit in their thinking about prayer.

Is PDI acceptable? I believe that, even with the qualifications, PDI as stated is too strong. I suspect that a good many ordinary believers don't accept or assume anything close to PDI, and (for reasons to be developed below) I doubt that there are very many Christians who fully accept PDI as stated above. Nevertheless, I am willing to accept PDI as a basis for discussion, because I think there are a good many believers who accept something close to PDI, with respect to at least some of their petitions.

Finally, why can't the free-will theist affirm PDI in good conscience? Ciocchi offers a formal argument here, but the basic point is rather simple: a great many appropriate petitions require for their fulfilment free actions on the part of persons other than God and the petitioner. But free-will theism lays great stress on the point that God respects our free choices and does not interfere with them. Ciocchi quotes David Basinger to the effect that 'it seems quite probable that there are many prayers for assistance that the God of BFWT [basic free-will theism] would like to answer affirmatively but simply cannot' (quoted on 50). This admission, however, seems clearly inconsistent with PDI. Ciocchi advises free-will theists to acknowledge this incongruity, to modify their own beliefs and practice of prayer accordingly, and to encourage others to do the same. But as he rightly says, this is likely to be a 'hard sell'.

### **Are other views better off?**

Before looking at possible responses to this argument, we need to consider the point Ciocchi leaves unaddressed: are other theistic views better placed than free-will theism to deal with the challenge of PDI? And here, of course, the different views need to be dealt with each on its own terms. Consider, first of all, other views that affirm libertarian free will for human beings. And among these, let us begin with those libertarian views that do not include divine middle knowledge. The main options here are 'simple foreknowledge', which affirms that God foreknows, in time, actions that are nevertheless free in the libertarian

sense, and divine timeless knowledge, which holds that God ‘sees’, outside of time, the contingent events that, within time, are still future from our perspective. Do these views offer an advantage, with regard to vindicating PDI, as compared with free-will theism?

The answer to this is simple, conclusive – and negative. It has been shown repeatedly that these views offer *no benefit whatever* in dealing with any of the issues concerning divine providence, as compared with free-will theism.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is that, in the logical or explanatory order (though not in the temporal order), God’s awareness of the outcome of His decisions is *subsequent* to the decisions themselves, and so cannot be used to inform the decisions at the time they are made. This point has, as I said, been argued repeatedly, and no plausible refutation has yet emerged.<sup>5</sup> And since Ciocchi makes no attempt to refute it, I am going to take the point here as established.

At one point Ciocchi seems to suggest that, even if the point just made is correct, it makes no difference. He writes, ‘even if these arguments fail to justify the beliefs of the [libertarian] theists who advance them, it remains true that these theists are willing to affirm the efficacy of petitionary prayer at a level that will satisfy the common “presumption of divine intervention” of ordinary believers’ (47). This stance cannot be sustained. If Ciocchi’s concern is merely pastoral in nature, then he could limit himself to advising theists of all stripes to adopt the appropriate attitudes towards their practice of prayer, without worrying over whether their basic theological positions are logically adequate to provide support for those attitudes. Clearly, however, he is not willing to do this in the case of free-will theism, so neither may he do it with regard to the versions of libertarian theism discussed above. And the fact is that these views are entirely on a par with free-will theism in their implications with regard to PDI.

But what about Molinism, the theory of divine middle knowledge? This theory does, in certain respects, afford advantages for divine control as opposed to both free-will theism and simple foreknowledge. For, according to Molinism, God’s knowledge of the consequences of a decision He might make is *prior*, in the logical and explanatory order, to His making it: thus, His knowledge of the ‘counterfactuals of freedom’ can be used (as simple foreknowledge cannot) to *guide* God’s decisions. Does *this* difference make a difference, with respect to PDI? The answer is that it may make some difference, but the difference is quite limited. Suppose a believer offers a prayer – an ‘appropriate’ prayer – that requires, for its fulfilment, a free decision on the part of some other person. God consults His middle knowledge and discovers the circumstances under which the person would make the requisite decision. God then brings it about that those circumstances obtain, the right decision is made, and the petition is granted. So far, so good.

But suppose what God finds through His middle knowledge is that there *are no* circumstances – or none that do not require a kind or degree of intervention that

divine wisdom finds unacceptable – under which the right decision will be taken? If this is so, and if we assume that simply overriding the person's free will is unacceptable to God, then God will be *unable* to grant the request, exactly as stated by Basinger.<sup>6</sup> And we can't just dismiss the possibility that the counterfactuals of freedom may be as unfavourable as this. Sometimes the counterfactuals (over which God has no control) just *are* very unfavourable; according to Molinism, this is the principal reason why the world is not a great deal better than it is.

It's true, of course, that given middle knowledge God would *know* in advance that His intervention would be successful. But God as understood by open theism would know which of all the possible circumstances would be *most likely* to bring about the desired result. And it is hardly to be supposed that God would refrain from trying to bring about a desired result just because success could not be guaranteed in advance. (Indeed, there is much in Scripture that suggests God often endeavours to persuade human beings to take a course which they ultimately refuse to take.) So if God acts so as to secure the greatest probability of a desired result, and the agent responds accordingly, then the prayer has been granted, just as it is for Molinism.

There remains, to be sure, a small opening which may enable Molinism to claim an advantage. It occasionally happens that human beings act 'out of character' – that is, they freely respond in a way that is different from what was most likely, given character, previous circumstances, and the like. If it is the case that, confronted with a particular situation, the agent would act out of character, then God possessed of middle knowledge would know this, and could tailor the circumstances to take advantage of the 'out-of-character' response. Without middle knowledge, on the other hand, God can be guided only by the probabilities based on character and circumstances, and will not be able to anticipate the deviant response in a particular case. So it may be that there are instances in which God with middle knowledge would be able to elicit a desired result which could not be obtained by God without such knowledge. But this benefit will at most come into play in a small fraction of cases; it can hardly make a substantial difference with regard to satisfying a wide-ranging claim such as PDI. And as we've seen, Molinism cannot, in fact, guarantee God's ability to satisfy the requirements of PDI; it leaves it entirely open that there are numerous requests God would like to grant, but cannot.

Finally, there are deterministic views according to which God sovereignly, and unilaterally, decrees everything that takes place. Here, of course, God gets everything He wants, down to the last detail; there can be no thought of His being unable to satisfy a principle such as PDI. But such views are rightly thought to carry with them immense difficulties of their own; in particular, they cause serious worries (worries which often trouble Calvinists in practice) about petitionary prayer. If God is going to do just what He wants to in any case, how can our prayers make a difference? The best that can be said is something like this: God,

desiring to bring about a certain result, causes believers to pray for that result, and then brings about the result He has caused them to pray for. Whether in this scenario our prayers are truly efficacious, and whether God is genuinely responsive to us, is much disputed. In any case, I do not believe Ciocchi's own position is of this kind, and I shall not pursue the matter further here. Anyone who thinks that such a deterministic theology accords better with the beliefs of ordinary Christians than views allowing for libertarian free will has a steep hill to climb.

### **Free-will theism and PDI**

We've seen that difficulties over PDI are by no means unique to open theism; these same difficulties are fully shared with other non-Molinist libertarian positions, and are almost as fully shared with Molinism as well. But we need to ask if there is anything to be said that will palliate (if not remove entirely) these difficulties. After all, it will hardly be a welcome result if we conclude (as Ciocchi thinks free-will theists should conclude) that God can hardly ever answer prayers that involve the free choices of other persons.

To his credit, Ciocchi himself works hard looking for answers along this line, and many of the answers to be considered here are answers he has already proposed. Some of his suggestions, to be sure, are easily dismissed. I have no interest in pursuing the line that would emphasize God's ability to perform physical miracles, while conceding His inability to intervene in events involving free actions. In fact, I agree with Ciocchi that free-will theists (as well as other libertarian theists) need to find ways to circumvent the proposition he calls A2: *God cannot bring it about that free agents act in particular ways except by overriding their free will*. I further agree with him that, in order to do so, free-will theists will do well to avail themselves of certain features of modern libertarian theory. Indeed, my own thinking has been in line with these features for some time. I haven't always found it necessary to say this, because (to my knowledge) the kind of challenge issued by Ciocchi hasn't been made before.

The first modification he suggests is that we give up the view that 'when undetermined free choices or actions occur, the viable alternatives must be equally probable' (54). I don't really know how widespread this view has been. I do find it among my Introduction to Philosophy students, but I would be inclined to doubt the competence of any present-day philosopher who embraced it. That I have rejected the view is clearly shown by my advocacy (which Ciocchi cites) of God's knowledge of 'would-probably' conditionals: the probabilities that God knows are not uniformly 0.5 in every case of a choice between two alternatives! And as Ciocchi points out, this means that God can act in a way that raises the probability of a certain response, perhaps raises it quite close to 1.0, while still leaving open the possibility that the agent will choose otherwise. It's just this sort of intervention that was presupposed in our earlier discussion of divine intervention

according to free-will theism. Ciocchi objects that where a desired result requires the joint occurrence of a number of free choices, so that the probabilities of the individual choices must be multiplied to arrive at the probability of overall success, then ‘the probability of divine success becomes depressingly small’ (56). And this much is true: if there is only one path to a desired outcome, requiring a number of different choices which are probabilistically independent of each other, and if several of these choices have probabilities of going right that are not much over 0.5, the likelihood of overall success does become quite low.<sup>7</sup> But this difficulty is matched by a parallel difficulty for Molinism: given the same sort of situation, it becomes quite likely that, with regard to at least one of the required choices, the counterfactuals of freedom will offer no possibility of a favourable outcome, or else a possibility that carries an unacceptably high price in divine intervention. (I believe many theists would regard as implausible the notion (see 55) that God would miraculously create a new, previously nonexistent vein of ore in a mine in order to satisfy someone’s need for employment!)

The other modification in libertarian theory recommended by Ciocchi is that we abandon a ‘generous libertarianism’, which holds that almost all of our actions are free in the libertarian sense, in favour of a ‘cautious libertarianism’ which holds that ‘many – perhaps most – of the actions of a free agent are determined by that agent’s character and circumstances’ (57). Contrary to Ciocchi’s supposition (59), I am somewhat sympathetic with this line also.<sup>8</sup> I do not, to be sure, agree with everything the ‘cautious libertarians’ have said. I do not agree with Campbell that libertarian choices occur only when there is a conflict between duty and desire. On the contrary, I believe we often make free choices between competing values when both of the values involved are morally beyond reproach. Nor do I agree with van Inwagen that genuinely undetermined choices are few and infrequent. I would hold that, even when the major characteristics of an action are causally predetermined, there are normally minor aspects of that same action that remain causally contingent and open to libertarian choice. (I suppose it is not possible, barring very special circumstances, that I will voluntarily abstain from all food for three days running. But the fact that it is determined that I shall eat *something* leaves open a great many choices about what, and when, and where I will eat.) I would agree with Kane that choices that are inevitable in view of a person’s character and circumstances may still be responsible, and even in a sense free, because it was through her previous libertarian choices that she became that sort of person. In cases of this sort, (which may constitute a fairly large proportion of the choices we make) our responses are completely predictable for the One who knows perfectly our character and circumstances, and this facilitates God’s ability to elicit from us the responses He desires.

Ciocchi, and Flint before him, seem to think that my embrace of this possibility is in conflict with my celebration of God’s willingness to take risks. Admittedly, there is a certain tension between the two.<sup>9</sup> There is also a tension involved in

praising God both for His righteous judgment of evil-doers and for His mercy to sinners. But I doubt very much that either Ciocchi or Flint supposes that we ought to give up one or the other of these modes of praise in order to eliminate the tension. If it can be shown that there is a logical inconsistency in the things I've said about this, I will be happy to revisit the matter. But showing such an inconsistency may not be easy. To say that God is a risk-taker is not to say that He deliberately takes great risks when His purposes can be achieved without them! It seems likely, however, that when the contribution to divine control made by cautious libertarianism has been fully accounted for, there will still be enough risk left in God's creation and providence to vindicate what has been said about that.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there remains the objection that the form of intervention described here, even when successful, is 'not strong enough' to satisfy the demands of piety. 'To petition God, at least as this is ordinarily understood, is to make a request of an agent who may say "no" but who cannot be blocked from granting the petition if His answer is yes'' (56).<sup>11</sup> Now I have no doubt that there are believers who would endorse this, and would on this account find the present account of answers to prayer unsatisfactory. About them, I raise two questions. First, how many of them are there? Are we still in the realm of 'consensus among ordinary believers', as was claimed for PDI itself? Or are we now dealing with a considerably smaller group? Second, are these believers *rationaly entitled* to affirm the strong doctrine of intervention they insist on?

Begin with the second question. As we've already seen, no theist who accepts any of the current options involving libertarian free will can deny that God could sometimes be prevented from granting a petition by the obdurate wills of creatures – provided, of course, that He is unwilling simply to override those wills. Free-will theists cannot deny this, but neither can the adherents of simple foreknowledge deny it. More to the point, even Molinists cannot deny it. On all these views, it can (and no doubt does) happen that God would like to accomplish something that requires a free creaturely decision, and the creature simply will not co-operate. Among the current options only theological determinists can satisfy the requirement as stated. They in turn have their own problems, which will not be pursued here. But if libertarians insist on 'strong intervention' as describe above, their protest can and should be disregarded, since this type of intervention is inconsistent with their own theological position.<sup>12</sup>

I believe, in fact, that quite a few reflective theists would be willing to acknowledge this, and to admit that sometimes God, desiring to answer a believer's prayer, will be unable to do so because of the perversity of creaturely willing. This need not mean that these believers are hesitant, tentative, or uncommitted in their life of prayer. They may have great confidence, as indeed they should, in God's ability to achieve His purposes in a wide variety of situations. And on the other hand, Scripture provides support for the view that sometimes God cannot



get everything He wants. Consider the lament of Jesus: ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing’ (Matthew 23.37). Are we to suppose that Jesus had never prayed for something he desired this much? Or that the Father, unlike the incarnate Son, had no desire for the conversion of the Jerusalemites? Yet these prayers were not answered, and the reason is given: ‘you were not willing’.

Nor is this an isolated exception, of the sort that would be allowed for by PDI. Consider the petition for ‘peace on earth’, contained in the Gloria, or the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, that ‘Thy will be done on earth’. One would be hard pressed to argue that either of these requests is not ‘appropriate’ in the sense of PDI. And while some of those who pray the Gloria and the ‘Our Father’ may for various reasons be insufficiently pleasing to God, this can hardly be true of all. On the contrary, some of the most devout believers have also been most assiduous in their use of these prayers. And given the very extensive use of both the Gloria and the Lord’s prayer, petitions of this sort probably constitute a significant fraction of all the prayers that are offered; they are by no means exceptional. Yet we must confess that peace on earth – especially the spiritual peace that is primarily intended – and the doing of God’s will are rather the exception than the general rule.<sup>13</sup> The reason, of course, lies squarely in the wills of creatures such as ourselves, who in very many cases are far from desiring what God desires and from willing to do God’s will. Examples such as these constitute compelling evidence that PDI as stated is overly strong, and I doubt that there are very many believers who, upon careful reflection, would continue to affirm it.<sup>14</sup>

Ciocchi’s challenge is not only surprising but paradoxical. It seems to contravene the experience of numerous believers who have found that adopting a free-will theist perspective, far from weakening the life of prayer, has challenged, invigorated, and strengthened it. It is possible, to be sure, that all these believers are simply confused, and that further reflection will reveal that free-will theism, if adhered to consistently, is inimical to the kind of prayer life they have come to prize. I submit, however, that the arguments presented by Ciocchi fail to demonstrate that this is the case. Free-will theism has not been shown to be religiously inadequate.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. David M. Ciocchi ‘The religious adequacy of free-will theism’, *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002), 45–61. (Page references in the text are to this article.) Ciocchi defines free-will theism as the view that God, by permitting extensive libertarian choices, has ‘voluntarily given up total control over much of what occurs in the human realm’, and that God ‘has exhaustive “present knowledge” but lacks middle knowledge or foreknowledge of future contingents, including the choices of free agents’ (46).
2. See my essay, ‘An adequate God’, in John B. Cobb, Jr and Clark H. Pinnock (eds) *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

3. This explanation contains quite a bit of vagueness: *How* 'pleasing to God' must the petitioner be before PDI comes into play? Ciocchi, however, can't afford to raise the bar too high; if he does, PDI may well cease to apply to most 'ordinary believers'.
4. See for example David Basinger 'Middle knowledge and classical Christian thought', *Religious Studies*, 22 (1986), 407–422; William Hasker *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 51–63; and John Sanders 'Why simple foreknowledge offers no more providential control than the openness of God', *Faith and Philosophy*, 14 (1997), 26–40.
5. For an attempted reply see David Hunt 'Divine providence and simple foreknowledge', *Faith and Philosophy*, 10 (1993), 394–414, with responses by Tomis Kapitan and David Basinger and a rejoinder by Hunt.
6. It's worth noting, in this connection, that Basinger made his assertion about *basic* free-will theism, which is any version of theism (including Molinism) in which God permits extensive libertarian choice and thus gives up total control of what happens in the world (see 46).
7. If on the other hand there are multiple paths, so that if one fails another can be taken, or if the choices are not probabilistically independent, so that one favourable choice increases the likelihood of others, or if many of the individual probabilities are close to 1.0, the prospects for success will be more favourable.
8. See my *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 105–107.
9. There also appears to be a tension between predictability and the emphasis on 'open dialogue' between God and human beings. But in ordinary human affairs, the two are entirely compatible. My life with my wife would be much less satisfying than it is, if our responses to each other were either completely predictable or completely unpredictable!
10. One might take the line of thought followed here by Ciocchi and Flint as an indication that, given cautious libertarianism, the element of risk has been sufficiently ameliorated that they no longer object to free-will theism. But I find I am unable to be this optimistic!
11. I take this to mean that, unconditionally, God cannot be prevented from granting a petition he wants to grant. The stated requirement would not amount to much if God were to answer 'No' to a petition *because* He knows He would be prevented from granting it.
12. In the interest of completeness it should be mentioned that there is a variety of Molinism developed by Francisco Suarez, known as *Congruism*, which is not subject to this objection. According to Congruism, the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom do not (as in standard Molinism) limit God's ability to obtain certain responses from creatures. Rather, they show how God is able, by providing grace 'congruent with' the state of the creature's soul, to elicit from a given creature any response God desires, *and to do so without overriding libertarian freedom*. In its practical bearing Congruism is very similar to theological determinism, and is subject to similar objections. I am not aware that there are any Congruists among contemporary Molinists.
13. Ironically, Ciocchi himself alludes to both these sorts of petitions (50). But he does not reflect on the implications for PDI of the fact that what is thus asked for often fails to occur.
14. Thomas Flint comments, 'Perhaps God's will will eventually be followed by most people ... . We simply do not have anything approaching proof that these petitions are not being granted' (private communication). I certainly would not deny that God is working, even now, to answer these prayers. But I believe that when we pray for God's will to be done on earth we are praying for this to happen *now*, or at least in the short- to middle-term future; we are not asking merely that this should occur in the *eschaton*. (Surely Jesus' lament over Jerusalem had to do with his own time, not with the last days, when none of the Jerusalemites of his day would be alive.)
15. My thanks to Thomas Flint for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.