

A new anti-Molinist argument

WILLIAM HASKER

Department of Philosophy, Huntington College, Huntington, IN 46750

Abstract. An argument is given showing that, on the assumptions of Molinism, human beings must bring about the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom that govern their actions. But, it is claimed, it is impossible for humans to do this, and so Molinism is involved in a contradiction. The Molinist must maintain, on the contrary, that we can indeed bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about us. This question turns out to depend on whether the counterfactuals of freedom are, or are entailed by, part of the causal history of the world. A further argument is given that these counterfactuals are entailed by events intrinsic to the world's history. If this is so, then we cannot bring about the truth of these counterfactuals; the anti-Molinist argument succeeds, and Molinism is refuted.

Ever since the re-emergence of the theory of divine middle knowledge, or Molinism, as a result of the work of Alvin Plantinga,¹ there have been suspicions that the theory was contradictory or conceptually incoherent. These suspicions have taken concrete form in arguments put forward by, among others, Anthony Kenny, Robert Adams, Linda Zagzebski, and myself.² The present argument is another of the same genre, but I believe it has some significant strengths as compared with earlier attempts. The argument is concise and comparatively easy to grasp, and it avoids employing some of the difficult primitive terms and contestable premises of those earlier efforts. It will almost certainly fail to persuade entrenched Molinists, but perhaps even they may be willing to admit that it brings some of the differences between Molinists and non-Molinists into sharper focus than has previously been done.

The key concept in this argument is the notion of an agent's 'bringing about' a state of affairs, a notion that is defined as follows:

- (BA) A brings it about that Y iff: For some X, A causes it to be the case that X, and $(X \ \& \ H) \Rightarrow Y$, and $\sim(H \Rightarrow Y)$, where 'H' represents the history of the world prior to its coming to be the case that X.³

¹ Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974). Two more recent Molinist classics are Luis de Molina *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Part IV of the *Concordia*), translated with an introduction by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), and Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

² For a fairly complete listing of the relevant sources, see Flint *Divine Providence*, 122n.

³ In this article the symbol ' \Rightarrow ' expresses strict (broadly logical, or metaphysical) necessitation; ' \rightarrow ' is the connective in the subjunctive or counterfactual conditional. The immediate ancestor of this definition appeared in my 'Middle knowledge: a refutation revisited', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995), 231. A correction is required, however. The definition put forward in that article was as follows: 'A brings

Given this definition, the argument proceeds as follows:

- (1) Agent A is in circumstances c , the counterfactual of freedom ‘ $C \rightarrow Z$ ’ is true of her, and she freely chooses to do z .
(Molinist premise)
- (2) A is in c , and it is in A’s power to refrain from doing z .
(From (1) and definition of libertarian freedom)
- (3) It is in A’s power to bring it about that: A is in c , and A refrains from doing z .
(From (2)⁴)
- (4) If it is in A’s power to bring it about that P, and ‘P’ entails ‘Q’ and ‘Q’ is false, then it is in A’s power to bring it about that Q.
(Power Entailment Principle)
- (5) (A is in c and refrains from doing z) \Rightarrow ($C \rightarrow \sim Z$).
(Molinist premise)
- (6) If it is in A’s power to bring it about that A is in c and refrains from doing z , and ‘($C \rightarrow \sim Z$)’ is false, then it is in A’s power to bring it about that ($C \rightarrow \sim Z$).
(From (4), (5))
- (7) It is in A’s power to bring it about that ($C \rightarrow \sim Z$).
(From (1), (3), (6))
- (8) It is not in an agent’s power to bring about the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom about her.
(Contested premise)
- (9) It is not in A’s power to bring it about that ($C \rightarrow \sim Z$).
(From (8))

As noted, premise (8) is the one Molinists will need to contest. (1) and (5) represent essential elements of Molinism. The first premise simply describes what happens, according to Molinism, whenever a person makes a free choice. And the fifth premise affirms that, any time a free choice is made, there is, necessarily, a true counterfactual of freedom describing how that choice would be made under the circumstances that then obtain; this also is an essential assumption of Molinism. The fourth premise, the ‘power entailment principle’, has been contested in the past, but it admits of a straightforward proof, given the present definition of ‘bring about’.⁵ And

it about that Y iff: For some X, A causes it to be the case that X, and $(X \& H) \Rightarrow Y$, and $\sim(H \Rightarrow Y)$, and $\sim(\sim X \rightarrow Y)$ [where H = the past history of the world prior to the occurrence of X]. Partly as a result of a criticism of Flint’s (see his *Divine Providence*, 154), I have come to see that the final clause, ‘ $\sim(\sim X \rightarrow Y)$ ’, is a mistake. That clause expresses the idea that one should not be said to bring about something that was going to happen anyway. But, upon reflection, that simply is not correct: that something was going to happen anyway may affect the nature of a person’s *responsibility* for bringing it about, but it does not change the *fact* that she brings it about. (If I saw down a tree that would have fallen in the next storm, it is still I, not the wind, that brings it about that the tree is down.) The corrected formula, then, is as given in the text.

⁴ In case this is not obvious, note that, given (BA) and the fact that A is in c , A’s refraining from doing z simply *is* A’s bringing it about that: A is in c , and A refrains from doing z . It follows that A’s power to do the former, is also A’s power to do the latter.

⁵ Informally stated, the proof proceeds as follows: according to (BA), if A, by causing it to be the case that X, were to bring it about that P, and ‘P’ entails ‘Q’, then *by that very same action* A would bring it

the logical moves involved in the various steps of the argument are beyond serious question.

This brings us back to (8), the premise on which the success of the argument depends. Molinists will and must affirm that we *do* have the power to bring about the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom about us, and that we do so at least on some occasions.⁶ Specifically, we will bring about the truth of such a counterfactual when we perform the action specified in the consequent of the counterfactual under the circumstances specified in the antecedent. To be sure, it is not the Molinist view that we *cause* these propositions to be true.⁷ Nevertheless, they claim that we ‘bring about’ the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom about us in the specific sense of the definition given above. For suppose I am in circumstances *c* and I perform action *z*. The full specification of the circumstances may best be thought of as including the entire previous history of the actual world; in effect, then, $C = H$. Then the Molinist will say that $(H \& Z) \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)$. But ‘H’ by itself does *not* entail ‘ $(C \rightarrow Z)$ ’, so ‘ $\sim [H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)]$ ’ is also true. So I perform an action such that my performing the action, together with the world’s past history, entails the counterfactual of freedom in question, whereas the world’s history by itself does not entail this counterfactual. And that is precisely what is required, according to the definition, for me to ‘bring it about’ that the counterfactual of freedom is true.

The questionable feature in this Molinist defence is found in the proposition ‘ $\sim [H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)]$ ’, which claims that the world’s past history does not entail the counterfactuals of freedom. These propositions are thus assigned the status of ‘soft facts’⁸ about the past, facts which are such that it is still possible that someone should act in such a way as to make them otherwise. As an example, take the fact that Freddoso’s translation of Molina appeared just ten years prior to the publication of Flint’s *Divine Providence*. (This was a ‘soft fact’ in 1988, since in 1988 it was still possible for someone to make it otherwise. It has now, however, assumed the status of a ‘hard

about that Q , provided that $\sim (H \Rightarrow Q)$. But if ‘ Q ’ is in fact false, it cannot be entailed by H , so ‘ $\sim (H \Rightarrow Q)$ ’ is true. So if A by causing it to be the case that X would bring it about that P , and $P \Rightarrow Q$ and $\sim Q$, then A by causing it to be the case that X would bring it about that Q .

Now suppose that A has the power to bring it about that P by causing it to be the case that X . It follows, trivially, that A does have the power to cause it to be the case that X . But it was shown above that A ’s causing it to be the case that X would bring it about that Q – always assuming, of course, that $P \Rightarrow Q$ and $\sim Q$. Which is to say: if it is in A ’s power to bring it about that P and ‘ P ’ entails ‘ Q ’ and ‘ Q ’ is false, then it is in A ’s power to bring it about that Q . *Q. Q. E.D.* (This proof is adapted from my ‘Middle knowledge: a refutation revisited’, 231–232.)

⁶ In setting out the Molinist response at this point, I am relying heavily on discussions with Thomas P. Flint. But I am confident that Molinists generally will respond in a similar fashion. After all – if Molinists fail to contest premise (8), the argument given in the text is lethal.

⁷ See Flint’s *Divine Providence*, 123–125, and Freddoso’s introduction to Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 75.

⁸ Flint has stated in correspondence that he prefers not to employ the terminology ‘soft facts’. I believe, however, that by using this terminology I can connect the present discussion with the literature in a helpful way; I will try to avoid any misleading connotations.

fact'.) So here is the crucial question: *is it justifiable to consider counterfactuals of freedom as 'soft facts' about the past?*⁹

Even though Molinists must deny that counterfactuals of freedom are entailed by the world's past history, it may be that there are, all the same, compelling reasons for saying that such counterfactuals, were they to exist, would indeed be part of, or be entailed by, that history. In fact, I shall now argue that this is the case. To be sure, counterfactuals of freedom do not report actual, concrete events in the past. But is there nothing in the world's past history that *entails* the truth of these counterfactuals? We must remember that in speaking of the history of 'the world', we are not referring to the planet earth, or even to the entire physical universe. The 'world' we are speaking of is *the actual world*, the maximal state of affairs that actually obtains; it includes states of affairs concerning God as well as those concerning the created universe. Now, the ongoing controversy about the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom has made us familiar with the question, whether God's *past beliefs* concerning matters that are still future are hard facts or soft facts about the past.¹⁰ It is important to recognize, however, that the question of the status of the counterfactuals of freedom is *a different question* than the question about the status of God's past beliefs about the future. Even if one is persuaded that there are sufficient reasons for classifying God's past beliefs as soft facts about the past, this conclusion cannot automatically be extended to cover the counterfactuals of freedom. Indeed, there are strong reasons why the counterfactuals of freedom should be classified as 'hard facts' about the past, facts that are, or are entailed by, part of the world's history.

What features must a state of affairs, or a true proposition, possess in order to qualify as a genuine part of the world's history? This question has proved difficult to resolve conclusively, but one extremely plausible sufficient condition can be stated as follows: *a fact is a part of the world's history if it has had causal consequences prior to the present time.* Facts that have such consequences are, so to speak, 'embedded' in the world's past, as part of the causal processes leading up to the present. If we assume, as I think we must, that the past is inalterable, then it is out of the question to suppose that those causal processes could now be made different in any way. Facts that have

⁹ Even apart from the argument given above, many Molinists would want to maintain that counterfactuals of freedom are soft facts about the past. For suppose that, contrary to the Molinist's assertion, H *does* entail the counterfactual of freedom ($C \rightarrow Z$). It would then follow that $(H \ \& \ C) \Rightarrow Z$, which is to say: the truth of Z, which describes an (allegedly) free action, is logically necessitated by the world's past history, a history which includes the circumstances in which the action described by 'Z' occurs. Most libertarians (including many Molinists) would consider this unacceptable. Some Molinists, however, might be willing to accept it on the grounds that 'accidental necessity' (the necessity of the past) is not (in their view) closed under entailment. (See Freddoso, introduction to Molina's *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 53–62.)

¹⁰ A number of essays discussing the 'hard fact–soft fact' distinction in this context will be found in John Martin Fischer (ed.) *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

thus become part of the world's history do not 'float free' from the concrete objects and events of the world, in the way that – to take a hypothetical example – the election of Albert Gore as the United States President in the year 2004 now floats free from the events about which we learn on the evening news broadcasts.

It has been suggested to me,¹¹ however, that this criterion begs the question against proponents of backward causation. Now, Molinists in general reject the possibility of backward causation, so in the present context it might be permissible to take this point as granted. Suppose, however, that we consider the possibility of such causation – suppose, for example, that Gore's election as Vice-President was caused, in part, by some future event, such as his election to the presidency in 2004. Should we then conclude that Gore's vice-presidency is still an open question – that it still may turn out either that he *was* elected Vice-President or that he was not so elected? This, I think, would be a most unreasonable conclusion to draw. Rather, we should conclude that Gore's election to the presidency, which is (by hypothesis) a cause whose effects are already present with us, is itself inevitable in the strongest sense. To be sure, it would be odd to describe this future event as part of the world's history. But the future event would resemble the events of history in a critical respect: it would already partake of the *necessity of the past*, or 'accidental necessity'. So while it might constitute an exception to my proposed criterion, this is not the kind of exception that would create any difficulty for the present argument.¹²

From the Molinist perspective, one of the most striking things about divine foreknowledge is that it is *not* causally embedded in the past history of our world. As Flint says:

...it is important to note that, on this Molinist picture, God's foreknowledge is neither the effect nor the cause of our free actions. Foreknowledge follows immediately from God's conjoining his creative act of will to his prevolitional knowledge; he has no need to observe or to be causally impacted in any way by the events he foreknows in order to know them. Even so, *that foreknowledge should not be seen as in any sense the cause of that which is foreknown*. God's foreknowledge and the contingent event foreknown are, in effect, two separate consequences of the creative act of will God selects. Indeed, foreknowledge is virtually *epiphenomenal*, in the sense that it is the *causally impotent byproduct* of a causally cornucopian act of divine will.¹³

Flint goes on to quote Molina to the effect that it is precisely because foreknowledge has no causal consequences that 'no prejudice at all is done to freedom of choice or to the contingency of things by God's foreknowledge'.¹⁴

¹¹ By an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies*.

¹² For more on the necessity of the past, and the asymmetry between past and future, see ch. 7 of my *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹³ Flint *Divine Providence*, 44–45 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45; the citation is taken from Molina *On Divine Foreknowledge*, Disputation 52, section 29 (184).

But divine middle knowledge, unlike foreknowledge, *is not causally impotent*. On the contrary: God's middle knowledge is part of the 'prevolitional' knowledge by which, prior to deciding upon his act of creative will, God knows what the full consequences of any particular decision on his own part would be. Indeed, God's decision about which creative act of will to perform (as Plantinga would say, about which possible world to weakly actualize) is *crucially guided* by His middle knowledge; that, in fact, is the whole point of the Molinist conception of providence. In the light of His middle knowledge, God surveys the creative options available to Him,¹⁵ and selects the one that is most pleasing and most in harmony with His ultimate purposes for His creation. Middle knowledge is intimately involved in the process by which the world comes to be as it is; it is causally relevant in the highest degree.

Our point here is not that middle knowledge would *predetermine* the course of events and thus deprive free actions of their freedom. This may or may not be true; it is not what is now being discussed. Our point is simply that middle knowledge, unlike divine foreknowledge of the actual future, is an integral part of the causal process that has made the world what it is today. God knows that a particular 'counterfactual of world-actualization' is true – He knows that, were He to perform a particular comprehensive act of creative will, a particular possible world would be actual¹⁶ – and, knowing this, He performs that act of creative will in preference to any of the others that were possible for Him. That is to say: God, on the basis of His knowledge of the counterfactuals of world-actualization, has chosen to perform the single, comprehensive creative act of will that has led to the present universe in all its splendour and variety. God's consideration of the counterfactuals of world-actualization is an integral part of the divine creative action, and is thus inescapably a part of the world's history. Contrary to the Molinist claims considered above, 'H' *does* entail 'C → Z', where 'C → Z' is a true counterfactual of freedom. But if this is so, then we created free agents do not bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about us; there is *no possible world* in which we do this. Now, what we do in no possible world, is impossible for us to do, and does not lie within our power to do. So premise (8) is true after all, and the anti-Molinist argument goes through.¹⁷

To sum up: an argument has been presented whose conclusion is that Molinism is incoherent. That argument succeeds if and only if the counterfactuals of freedom are a part of, or are entailed by, the world's history. In

¹⁵ This does not, of course, involve temporal succession; we are concerned here rather with logical dependence, or explanatory priority.

¹⁶ For counterfactuals of world-actualization see Flint *Divine Providence*, 65–70. In surveying the counterfactuals of world-actualization, God contemplates all the counterfactuals of freedom that are true in all the worlds he could actualize.

¹⁷ To be sure, the trouble begins long before step (9) is reached. On the assumptions given, one can make a compelling case that (1), the basic Molinist description of a free choice, is impossible. This, however, merely underscores the fact that, in order to defend Molinism, a different conception of the world's history is required.

support of the claim that they are indeed entailed by the world's history, it was pointed out that all of the counterfactuals of freedom concerning feasible worlds are an integral part of the process by which God decides which world to actualize, and thus they are embedded in the past causal history of the actual world. Unless Molinists can present convincing reasons why the divine decision-making is not part of the world's history, the anti-Molinist argument succeeds.¹⁸

¹⁸ My thanks to Thomas P. Flint and to an anonymous referee for this journal for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.