

## A new anti-anti-Molinist argument

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**Abstract.** This paper argues that William Hasker's 'A new anti-Molinist argument' offers a fascinating but ultimately unsuccessful new instalment in his continuing campaign to discredit the picture of providence based on the theory of middle knowledge. It is first shown that Hasker's argument, though suffering from a seemingly irreparable logical gap, does nicely highlight a significant (and hitherto unduly underemphasized) point of contention between Molinists and anti-Molinists – the question whether or not Molinists are committed to viewing counterfactuals of creaturely freedom as part of the history of the world. Hasker's argument that they are so committed is shown to be lacking, for that argument depends upon a premise against which several contemporary Molinists have already presented independent arguments. Furthermore, the premise is not one which, on reflection, many traditional Christians could easily accept. Hence, Hasker's argument fails. It may remind us that some of the things Molinists are led to say are surprising, but it by no means shows that those surprising consequences make the view unworthy of our allegiance.

William Hasker's 'A new anti-Molinist argument' constitutes his newest fusillade against his long-time *bête noire*, the Molinist picture of divine providence. Hasker presents us with a fascinating argument against middle knowledge, one which could well sway hasty readers toward his camp. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that it should have hardly any effect on careful readers who have thus far remained neutral regarding this quarrel, and no effect at all on those already enrolled in the Molinist ranks.

Though I think Hasker does properly highlight a real bone of contention in this debate, the manner in which he does so leaves something to be desired. On the one hand, his argument from (1) to (7) is unduly complex; on the other hand, his move from (8) to (9) is invalid as it stands and difficult to render viable.

Hasker offers a long and convoluted argument to show that the Molinist is committed to:

- (7) It is in A's power to bring it about that  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ .

But, assuming both that:

- (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

is being employed as our account of bringing about and that (as Hasker later makes clear) we are to think of  $H$  as being identical with  $C$ , the claim that the Molinist would want to embrace (7) hardly seems controversial. Given (BA), (7) is true just in case there's some  $X$  such that:

- (i)  $A$  has the power to cause it to be the case that  $X$ ,
- (ii)  $[(X \ \& \ H) \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow \sim Z)]$ ,

and

- (iii)  $\sim [H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow \sim Z)]$ .

Clearly, though,  $\sim Z$  can play the role of our  $X$  here. Given:

- (1) Agent  $A$  is in circumstances  $c$ , the counterfactual of freedom ' $C \rightarrow Z$ ' is true of her, and she freely chooses to do  $z$ ,

$A$  has the power to cause it to be the case that  $\sim Z$ , so (i) is satisfied. If  $H = C$ , then no Molinist would doubt that  $(\sim Z \ \& \ H)$  entails  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ , meaning that (ii) is satisfied. And since (1) tells us that  $(C \rightarrow Z)$  is in fact true, no Molinist worth her salt would think that  $H$  entails  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ ; hence, (iii) is true as well. If Hasker is granted his two assumptions, then, he needn't conduct his readers on so serpentine a path from (1) to (7), for the Molinist's commitment to (7) should be patent.

The move from:

- (8) It is not in an agent's power to bring about the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom about her,

to

- (9) It is not in  $A$ 's power to bring it about that  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ ,

on the other hand, is perplexing. (8) seems to be saying that, if a counterfactual of creaturely freedom is true, the creature in question has no power to bring about that truth. (1) tells us that  $(C \rightarrow Z)$  is true. Hence, (8) seems to imply that it is not in  $A$ 's power to bring it about that  $C$  counterfactually implies  $Z$ . But how we get from this assertion to the claim that  $A$  lacks the power to bring it about that  $C$  counterfactually implies *not*- $Z$ , which is what (9) tells us, is less than pellucid.

One might suspect that Hasker is thinking of (8) as a necessary truth. Perhaps his idea is that the truth of *any* counterfactual of creaturely freedom would entail that the creature involved lacked the power to bring about that truth. If we were to think of (8) in this way, then it would tell us that  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$  entails that  $A$  lacks the power to bring it about that  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ . But though the consequent of this entailment is the desired (9), the derivation of

that consequent would apparently still be beyond our grasp, for the antecedent of that entailment – i.e.,  $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$  – is, given (1), false. So thinking of (8) as necessary would not bring us appreciably closer to (9).

Have we unearthed, then, a fundamental and irreparable flaw in Hasker's argument? I'm not sure. One might think, for example, that the rest of Hasker's paper shows us how to construct an argument for (9) which nicely underscores Hasker's point concerning a ground-level issue on which he and Molinists disagree. Hasker clearly thinks of  $H$  as including only (to use his terminology) the 'hard facts' about the past. But if a counterfactual of creaturely freedom were part of the 'hard' past, one would hardly expect anyone now to have the power to bring about the contrary of that counterfactual. Hence, if we let  $P(x)$  abbreviate 'it is in  $A$ 's power to bring it about that  $x$ ', then

$$(8a) [H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)] \Rightarrow [\sim P(C \rightarrow \sim Z)]$$

seems to be a plausible principle for Hasker to be employing. If we then add as a further premise

$$(8b) [H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)],$$

we arrive immediately at  $\sim P(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ , which is simply our shorthand for (9).

Were (8a) indisputable, this renovation would have much to recommend it. For not only would it allow us validly to arrive at (9), but it would do so in a way that would underscore one of Hasker's prime contentions: that the whole debate hinges on whether or not the Molinist can plausibly deny (8b). But, alas, (8a) is not indisputable. Intuitively, it sounds plausible enough. If a counterfactual is part of the 'hard' past – if it is one of those truths about the past which is fixed, settled, accidentally necessary, or whatever term one wishes to employ here – then it *does* seem preposterous to think that anyone could bring about its contrary. But, of course, everything depends upon how the notion of bringing about is being understood. And the fact of the matter is that, if we interpret 'bring about' along the lines of Hasker's (BA), it turns out that (8a) is *true* if and only if (8b) is *false*. Let me explain.

Suppose (8b) is false. Since (8b) is an entailment, it is, if false at all, necessarily false. But if it's necessarily false, then it entails anything whatsoever, including  $\sim P(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ . So if one thinks that (8b) is false, one should think that (8a) is true.

Suppose, on the other hand, that (8b) is true. This, of course, just is to suppose that the antecedent of (8a) is true. Would the consequent of (8a) also then be true? Or could  $P(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$  be true even if  $[H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)]$  were true? Well,  $P(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$  just is Hasker's (7), and as I argued above (see the third paragraph), the Molinist would have no qualms about (7) if (BA) is being assumed. Nor would the argument for (7) be negatively affected by the

truth of (8b). So the truth of (8b) does not entail the falsity of (7). Therefore, if (8b) is true, (8a) is false.

Whatever one is inclined to think of (8b), then, under no circumstances would one reasonably think that both it and (8a) were true. Hence, my friendly amendment to Hasker's argument fails. And I must confess that I don't at this point see any other way for the argument to proceed.

Of course, my failure here may easily be a function more of my limited philosophical imagination than of there being no viable way of getting to (9) with only (8b) as a contestable premise. So suppose we've found such a way. That is, suppose we've found some premise *Q* which is both incontestable (at least from a Molinist standpoint) and which together with (8b) entails (9). What then should we conclude?

Well, that depends upon what we think of (8b). Molinists, I think, would naturally look askance at (8b). For if  $(H = C)$ , then (8b) entails  $(H \Rightarrow Z)$ ,<sup>1</sup> and no libertarian wants to think that the fixed history of the world entails an agent's free actions. Nevertheless, Hasker insists that Molinists cannot plausibly reject (8b). For middle knowledge, according to the Molinist, is 'intimately involved in the process by which the world comes to be as it is; it is causally relevant in the highest degree'. Since God utilizes His knowledge of these counterfactuals in deciding which world to actualize, they have indeed had a causal impact on the world's history. And since, says Hasker, it is 'extremely plausible' to assert that 'A fact is part of the world's history if it had causal consequences prior to the present time', Molinists must concede that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are indeed part of the world's fixed, settled, hard history. In sum, they have no means of eluding (8b).

Now, in calling our attention to (8b), I feel that Hasker has genuinely furthered the discussion concerning middle knowledge. Earlier anti-Molinist arguments by Hasker and others *may* have *implied* that the Molinist is committed to (8b), but so far as I am aware, none of them *explicitly* used this premise; if (8b) was there at all in their arguments, it was hidden well in the background. By ushering it onto centre stage, Hasker has done us all a service.

This is not to say, however, that I share Hasker's assessment of Molinists' need to embrace (8b). His argument hinges on that 'extremely plausible' assumption (call it *Hasker's Assumption*, or *HA* for short) that something which has had causal consequences in the past is ipso facto a hard, fixed, settled fact about the past. But Hasker must surely know that Molinists will have deep misgivings about this assumption. For it also seems extremely plausible to suppose that if something which *is* a fact about the past would *not* have been

<sup>1</sup> If  $(H = C)$ , then  $[H \Rightarrow (C \rightarrow Z)]$  iff  $[H \Rightarrow (H \rightarrow Z)]$ . But if every H-world is a  $(H \rightarrow Z)$ -world, then every H-world is a Z world – i.e.,  $(H \Rightarrow Z)$ .

a fact about the past had I exercised my power to act in a certain way, then that something is not a hard, fixed, settled fact about the past. (Call this thesis *Yet another Extremely plausible Supposition*, or *YES* for short.) Now, in their discussions of a number of issues related to divine providence, various Molinists have made it evident that, if God has middle knowledge, there are facts about the past which have had causal consequences in the past, but over which we do indeed have the kind of counterfactual control specified in the antecedent of *YES*. And this means, of course, that Molinists have a powerful basis for rejecting *HA*.

The discussions I have in mind should be familiar to those readers who have followed the recent debates concerning middle knowledge. Consider, for example, Plantinga's argument concerning Paul and the ants.<sup>2</sup> Suppose that Paul freely refrains from mowing his lawn today. Unbeknownst to Paul, his garden has recently been graced by a colony of ants, a colony whose continued existence is (for some reason) important to God. Had God known that Paul *would* mow today, God would have prevented any harm from coming to the ants by seeing to it that they moved onto the land of some less industrious gardener. But, being free, Paul genuinely has the power to mow. So he has the power to do something (mow) such that, were he to do it, the ants would not have moved into his garden last week. Hence, by *YES*, it follows that their having moved in is not a fixed fact about the past. But clearly, the fact that the ants moved in has had lots of causal consequences; mounds of dirt, blades of grass, other insects, and the like have all been causally affected by the arrival of the ants. So the fact about the past over which Paul has counterfactual power is one which *has* had causal consequences, but nevertheless *is not* fixed. And so the story of Paul and the ants constitutes a counter-example to *HA*.

Much the same conclusion is reached if we look at Molinist discussions of prophecy – for example, Freddoso's handling of the issue in the introduction to his translation of Molina.<sup>3</sup> Freddoso uses the case of Christ's prophesying Peter's betrayal as his example. At the time when Peter issues his denials, the history of the world already includes Jesus' having foretold the denials. This is a fact about the past which has already had causal consequences (e.g., Peter has a memory of Jesus' having uttered those words). Yet there is something that Peter is free to do (namely, not deny Jesus) such that, were he to do it, Jesus would never have foretold those denials – assuming, of course, that Jesus could not be mistaken on such a matter. So Christ's prophesying the denials is not a fixed fact about the past, despite the presence of clear causal consequences of that act of prophesying. Again, we seem to have solid Molinist grounds for denying *HA*.

<sup>2</sup> See Alvin Plantinga 'On Ockham's way out', *Faith and Philosophy*, 3 (1986), 235–269.

<sup>3</sup> See 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), 53–62.

Finally, consider my handling of a case of retrospective prayer – i.e., of praying for something to have happened.<sup>4</sup> Imagine a mother hears that her daughter's mountaineering party has been climbing in an area beset by a blizzard. She knows that her daughter might not have survived the storm, but at this point has no specific information about her condition. The thought of praying that her daughter has survived crosses her mind, but she in fact offers no such prayer. Now, suppose the girl has, in fact, perished. Might it not nevertheless be the case that, had God known by middle knowledge that the mother would pray for her daughter's safety if placed in those unenviable circumstances, He would have arranged things in such a way that the girl survived the storm? If so, then the mother, at the time when she receives news of the storm, has the power to do something (pray) such that, were she to do so, something which both *is* a fact about the past (namely, that the daughter died in the blizzard) and *has* already had causal consequences would *not* have been a fact about the past. And this, too, is at odds with *HA*.

So Molinists seem to have powerful reasons for rejecting *HA*, and with it Hasker's new anti-Molinist argument. Indeed, I think that even those who are genuinely undecided concerning the Molinist controversy should have their doubts about *HA*. If they are both well informed and honestly uncommitted, then presumably they will see the force and to some extent feel the attraction of the Molinist arguments concerning ants, prophecy, and retrospective prayer; hence, they should realize that Molinism precludes its knowledgeable adherents from accepting *HA*. Given their own neutrality in the debate, one would think they could hardly be left with any firm convictions concerning the status of *HA*. Of course, if *HA* had the kind of luminous lustre that, say, Leibniz's Law exhibits, things might be different. But I seriously doubt that many who have thought about these matters sufficiently (and who are not *already* committed anti-Molinists) will ascribe to *HA* so exalted an epistemic status; Hasker's 'extremely plausible' will surely strike most as just a little exaggerated. Furthermore, I suspect that most relatively orthodox Christians, regardless of their familiarity with the contemporary contest concerning middle knowledge, would have their doubts about *HA* were they to see that it implies, for example, that once Jesus has issued his prophecy about Peter, either Peter's freedom or Jesus' infallibility needs to be sacrificed.

In fairness to Hasker, it should be conceded that some of the things Molinists are led to say here will initially, in all likelihood, strike even Molinists as somewhat surprising. Few Molinists, I should think, start off *expecting* that we might have counterfactual power over whether ants moved into a certain garden last week, or whether a man said certain words several

<sup>4</sup> See my *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), ch. 11.

hours ago, or whether a girl died in a blizzard a day or so past. But we need to be careful here not to conflate the surprising with the absurd. *Any* interesting philosophical or theological position, I suggest, is going to have implications which no advocate would have anticipated; that's part of what makes the position interesting. The question is whether those unforeseen elements, after careful examination, turn out to be pebbles in one's shoes or gems on one's fingers. That is, does the surprising become, upon reflection, even more surprising, even more anomalous and pointless given one's total picture of the world? Or does it rather begin to appear not merely to cohere with the other things one believes, but in fact to illuminate them in myriad and unexpected ways?

My own experience, for what it is worth, is that the Molinist thesis at issue – that we may have counterfactual power over past facts which have already had causal consequences – is more a case of the latter than the former, more the gem than the pebble. Our understanding of issues such as prophecy, prayer, infallibility, Incarnation and, I suspect, many others is immeasurably enriched once we begin seriously to look at such matters through Molinist lenses. Others may disagree. But this is the battlefield, I think, on which the war between Molinists and Anti-Molinists must ultimately be decided. To think that we can point to a surprising consequence of *either* view and thereby achieve a quick victory is to view the conflict in too jejune a manner.

Hence, though I think we are all indebted to Hasker for highlighting via his new argument a somewhat overlooked but central element to the Molinist controversy, I feel confident that the argument by itself neither will nor should play much of a role in settling the debate.