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Back from the Future: Divine Supercomprehension and Middle Knowledge as Ground for Retroactive Ontology

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Summary: In this article, I attempt to solve a problem in Wolfhart Pannenberg’s eschatology, which is best understood as a retroactive ontology. Pannenberg argues that the future exerts a retroactive causal and determinative power over the present, though he also claims that said future does not yet concretely exist. The problem can be posed thus: How does a non-concrete future hold retroactive power over the concrete present? I argue that the doctrines of middle knowledge and supercomprehension formulated by the Spanish Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina, provide an adequate solution to this problem while still preserving both the retroactive power of the nonconcrete future as well as genuine human libertarian free choice.

Keywords: Eschatology, Ontology, Middle Knowledge, Supercomprehension, Systematic Theology, Molinism, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Luis de Molina


Schlüsselwörter: Eschatologie, Ontologie, mittleres Wissen, super-comprehensio, Systematische Theologie, Molinismus, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Luis de Molina

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I. Introduction

The eschatological orientation of Jesus’ message in the New Testament is without question. Few systematic theologians have emphasized properly the priority of the future Kingdom of God as Wolfhart Pannenberg. Indeed, one could say Pannenberg’s entire theological project is eschatologically driven.\(^1\) Eschatology is the logical priority and starting point for theology. Not only does eschatology set the course for theology, but it does so for ontology as well. Indeed, one of the central doctrines of Pannenberg’s ambitious theological project is what we may call "retroactive ontology," wherein he claims that the future retroactively determines, constitutes, and defines the essence and meaning of the past and present.\(^2\) The future, however, does not yet concretely exist.

This raises the following question: how might a nonconcrete future exert retroactively causal and determinative power over the past and present? Pannenberg insists that the future is the all-determining power over the present and that the future is genuinely open, but he never explains how this is the case. As David Polk notes, he seems to assume this to be “self-evident—even, perhaps, tautological.”\(^3\) Not only does Pannenberg want to preserve the determinative yet open nature of the future, he wants to preserve the genuine freedom of creatures in their self-determination as well. Polk argues that Pannenberg is caught in a contradiction here. Either he must concede God’s absolute freedom as the all-determining power of the future, thus opening him up to experiencing historical change and development within the Godhead, or he must concede the openness of the future along with creaturely freedom. Though Pannenberg rejects this dilemma, he does not explicate a way as to how he plans to have all that he wants.

In what follows, I aim to provide a solution to what I term the \textit{Pannenberg problem}, i.e. the problem posed above. I find the solution to the Pannenberg problem in the work \textit{On Divine Foreknowledge} by the 16th century Jesuit philosophical theologian Luis de Molina. Molina’s doctrines of middle knowledge and super-

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comprehension provide adequate grounds for the claims that the future has determinative and causal power over the present and that said future has yet to come into concrete existence, thus preserving the freedom of creatures.

First, I explicate Pannenberg’s doctrine of retroactive ontology. Next, I provide an explanation of Molina’s doctrines of middle knowledge and supercomprehension. Finally, I demonstrate how God’s middle knowledge and supercomprehension of creaturely essences provides adequate grounds on which to base this retroactive ontology.

II. Pannenberg’s Retroactive Ontology

There are three irreducible aspects to Pannenberg’s understanding of eschatology: first, the centrality of the future Kingdom of God in the message of Jesus; second, that the whole is ontologically prior to the parts that make it up, i.e. holism; and third, the relationship between time and eternity. We will examine each of these in order to discern Pannenberg’s retroactive ontology.

II.1 Eschatology in the Message of Jesus

“The message of Jesus centered in the proclamation of the imminent Kingdom of God.” 4 Thus Pannenberg opens the first chapter in his small work *Theology and the Kingdom of God.* He rightly highlights the irony present in much contemporary theology, namely, that the imminent Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus’ proclamation and how it has presently been consigned to nearly minutiae in the modern theological endeavor. He notes the prominence of eschatology in the dialectical theologies of Barth, Bultmann, and others, but he criticizes their attempts to make it timeless, or atemporal. He wrote, “It is true that, in dialectical theology, eschatology became a slogan. But for Bultmann and for the young Barth, Jesus’ eschatology is timeless and deprived of its temporal meaning. Dialectical theology disregarded Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God as an expectation regarding the concrete future.” 5 Christian theology must recover the rightful centrality of the future Kingdom of God in its contemporary endeavors if it is to model the message of Jesus. Pannenberg comments, “In the New Testa-

5 Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God,* 52.
ment, however, Jesus’ message of the imminent Kingdom of God precedes every Christology and every new qualification of human existence and thus becomes the foundation of both.”6 Eschatology, in other words, must take back its rightful seat as the priority in Christian theology.

Most essential to Jesus’ eschatological message is the priority of the future: “Our starting point then is the Kingdom of God understood as the eschatological future brought about by God himself. Only in the light of this future can we understand man and his history.”7 In Jesus’s context, the Kingdom of God was understood as YHWH’s return, restoration, and reign over his creation, what N. T. Wright often refers to as “the return from exile.”8 The Kingdom of God was not something that was absent from history or the space-time continuum; it was something that would happen in history, in time. What’s more, Jesus proclaimed that this future rule of God was irrupting into time and history in himself. He was the eschatological consummation for which Israel hoped. The future was becoming present.

This imminent Kingdom of God, as highlighted in the message of Jesus, was not something that was off in the future: it was actually breaking into the present from the future. Pannenberg writes, “The accent of Jesus’ message differed from the Jewish eschatological hope at precisely this point: Jesus underscored the present impact of the imminent future.”9 The Kingdom was not something that Israel should be passively awaiting. In the person of Jesus, this future reign of God was coming into the present and laying claim to the world. In Pannenberg’s words, “God’s rule is not simply in the future, leaving men to do nothing but wait quietly for its arrival. No, it is a mark of Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God that future and present are inextricably interwoven.”10

Though Jesus proclaimed that the imminent Kingdom of God was irrupting into the present, he still referred to it as the coming Kingdom of God. Fundamental to his message remained the futurity of the Kingdom.11 Jesus still spoke of the Kingdom that was to be. That the present and future are interwoven in the message of Jesus is something Pannenberg criticizes much modern scholarship for passing over, denigrating it as “a hangover from Jewish apocalyptic.”12 Nor can we accept what Cullman said, namely that the Kingdom began in the person of Jesus and was venturing towards its future climax. Rather, “It is more appropriate

6 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 52–53.
7 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 53.
9 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 53.
10 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 53.
11 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 53–54.
12 PANNENBERG, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 54.
to reverse the connection between present and future, giving priority to the future."\textsuperscript{13}

Though this reversal seems counterintuitive to modern thought, Pannenberg argues that it fits well with the ancient Jewish hope for God’s future reign. Pannenberg provides the following summary:

Jesus’ particular emphasis can be understood as a modification of the Jewish hope: God’s Kingdom does not lie in the distant future but is imminent. Thus, the present is not independent from that future. Rather does the future have an imperative claim upon the present, alerting all men to the urgency and exclusiveness of seeking first the Kingdom of God. As this message is proclaimed and accepted, God’s rule is present and we can even now glimpse his future glory. In this way we see the present as an effect of the future, in contrast to the conventional assumption that past and present are the cause of the future. This priority of the eschatological future which determines our present demands a reversal also in our ontological conceptions.\textsuperscript{14}

The future impacts the present, to the extent that the present can be seen as an effect of the future. In the person and work of Jesus, God reaches into the present from his future. As Christian Mostert comments, “The heart of this ontological vision is this: just as in Jesus’ preaching the future kingdom of God already determines the present, without ceasing to be a future reality, so the future is ontologically prior to the present and is in some sense determinative of the present – and thus of the past.”\textsuperscript{15} This eschatological work, as Pannenberg highlights in the above quotation, is both retroactive and ontological. But how is this possible? How can the present be an effect of the future?\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{II.2 Holism: The Whole Lords Over the Parts}

In order to understand how the future is retroactively determinative of the present, we must understand Pannenberg’s view of history (\textit{Geschichte}). Inseparable from the identity, or essence, of history is the meaning of history. We cannot say what history is without saying what it means. In this perspective, the questions of identity and meaning coincide. The identity, or essence, of a thing cannot be

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Pannenberg, \textit{Theology and the Kingdom of God}, 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Pannenberg, \textit{Theology and the Kingdom of God}, 54. Emphasis mine.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Mostert, \textit{God and the Future}, 56.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Pannenberg further grounds this idea of interwovenness in Jesus’s resurrection. The future is interwoven with the present namely because Jesus’s resurrection is a proleptic event. See especially Wolfhart Pannenberg, \textit{Jesus—God and Man}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 53–88.
\end{itemize}
decided apart from its telos. The telos of history is the key to the essence and meaning of history; but this implicates the totality of history being essential to the essence of history.

Fundamental to this notion that the totality of history has priority over the particulars of history is Pannenberg’s position that the whole has logical priority over particulars.17 This is not just the case with history but with every created thing. Indeed, this notion is foundational to Pannenberg’s theory of meaning. He explicated this in his important work on theological method, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, wherein he urges that all sciences, including theology, are fundamentally hermeneutic. He defines the aim of hermeneutic as “the understanding of meaning, and meaning is to be understood in this context as the relation of parts to whole within a structure of life or experience.”18 Meaning may be defined as the relation of parts to whole, but the whole serves as the priority in Pannenberg’s definition. Every instance of meaning is determined by its presence in the totality of meaning. Though the totality of meaning is constituted by individual instances of meaning, it is the totality that holds determinative power over the particulars. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. For this reason, there can be no distinction between meaning and significance.19

Pannenberg also discusses his understanding of meaning in the essay “Eschatology and the Experience of Meaning.”20 Following his previous discussion in *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, Pannenberg affirms that the totality of meaning holds priority over particular instances of meaning. Concerned with the historical, the totality of history determines the meaning of particular historical events. The end, or climax, of history, i.e. the eschaton, holds retroactive determinative power over the meaning of the past and present. He likens this to instances of semantic meaning in that words and sentences have meaning that is determined by the context in which they occur.21 On the experience of meaning in historical events he writes,

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19 Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 216.
21 This is a structuralist concept of meaning, and it is prevalent in the semiotic works of a number of semioticians, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev, and A. J. Greimas. One can find
Here, because of the dependence of the parts upon the whole, there must be assumed for every concrete experience a totality of meaning, even if it is only posited implicitly. And it is only this totality of meaning which makes it possible to define the significance experienced in any single thing that happens to one, or associated with any individual action – even if this totality of meaning is only anticipated, and may change as experience proceeds, just as may the individual significance which has been experienced.22

Whenever individuals interpret any experience of meaning they always suppose a totality of meaning, even if implicitly, that determines and constitutes the meaning of the single event.

History is still open, according to Pannenberg.23 As such, the final meaning and essence of history remain open. Only at the close of history will the absolute meaning and essence of history be determined. This does not, however, imply that current history and particular events of experience are understood as meaningless or without identity. God has revealed the meaning and essence of history proleptically in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In the resurrection event, the essence and meaning of history have irrupted into the present. However, the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection is likewise determined by the future reign of God.24 For example, should Jesus never return as he promised his disciples, then this future lack of event would have retroactive determinative power over the meaning and essence of Jesus’ resurrection. In this sense, the meaning and essence of Jesus’ resurrection itself is still open to the future in that it likewise anticipates the full consummation of God’s Kingdom. Only at this eschatological irruption of the Kingdom will history become complete, encompassing the totality of all historical experience, and only thus will the meaning of particular instances of meaning be determined as absolute. In other words, the whole lords over the parts.


22 Pannenberg, “Eschatology and the Experience of Meaning,” 204.
II.3 Time and Eternity

The final aspect of Pannenberg’s retroactive ontology in need of discussion is the relationship between time and eternity. Pannenberg defines eternity neither as divine timelessness nor as unlimited temporal duration. Rather, he affirms that view of time found in the works of Plotinus and Boethius, namely that eternity is the totality of time.25 According to these two, eternity is “the presence of the totality of life.”26 In other words, eternity is the totality of time; it is the whole of time. Eternity is “where” God is as the all-determining power of the future. More specifically, eternity is most properly located in the future, namely the eschatological Kingdom of God.

Pannenberg’s emphasis of the priority of the whole over the parts is helpful for understanding his theory of time and eternity. Again, eternity is the totality of time, the whole that unites and establishes each successive moment of time. As a result, eternity is present to and in each moment of time. This raises the question: if God is the power of the future, and if the future is the proper “location” of eternity, then how, exactly, does God relate to time? With his emphasis on eternity as the totality, or fullness, of time, Pannenberg seems to affirm that God stands outside of time, much like the unmoved mover of Aristotle. This is not, however, what he is arguing for. The unmoved mover of Aristotle was opposed to time, and, consequently, so was eternity. Hence, the view of time and eternity coming from him was that of divine timelessness. Following Theodor Haering, Pannenberg rejects this view: “Against the mere opposing of eternity to time Theodor Haering rightly reminded us that while the Bible stresses God’s transcendence over changing time it also uninhibitedly presupposes a real relation of God to time. This is possible only if the reality of God is not understood as undifferentiated identity but as intrinsically differentiated unity. But this demands the doctrine of the Trinity.”27

God genuinely relates to time though he is not affected by time. More specifically, God experiences each and every moment of time though there is no development in him.28 God is both transcendent and imminent in regard to time, and he

28 Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 62.
is so due to his Trinitarian nature. The Trinitarian nature of God allows him to be both absolutely transcendent and absolutely imminent in relation to creation, including time. Ted Peters refers to this as a “proleptic concept of creation.” Though the fullness of time, i.e. eternity, exists at the end of time it is already present in each and every moment. This prolepsis occurs in two ways: conceptually as a regulative idea for understanding each moment of time, and concretely in the resurrection of Jesus. As discussed above, the future has concretely reached back into the present in the resurrection of Jesus, forming a prolepsis.

Pannenberg’s theory of time is a sort of hybrid between the concepts of divine timelessness and everlasting temporality. It affirms God’s power over time while also defending God’s actual action in time. Yes, God is from everlasting to everlasting; however, he is not completely separate from time. His view of time affirms eternity as necessitating the completion, or end, of time, though it also affirms genuine temporal becoming on the part of creatures. There is much more to be said on Pannenberg’s view of time and eternity; however, space does not allow for more discussion here. Suffice it to say that his view of the relationship between time and eternity mirrors his holism, that the whole has power over and is logically and ontologically prior to the parts. Eternity has the ontological and logical priority over distinct temporal moments and is what constitutes their identity and essence. However, this does not eliminate the genuine succession of temporal moments, i.e. genuine temporal becoming. Eternity is that whole which binds together, unites, and is the grounds of the distinctiveness of all temporal moments, thus preserving actual temporal becoming. The future, however, is genuinely open, according to Pannenberg, which brings us back to our initial question: how can a nonconcrete future hold retroactive determinative and causal power over the present?

30 Peters, God—The World’s Future, 274–86.
III. Luis de Molina and the Solution to Pannenberg’s Problem

III.1 Molina on Middle Knowledge and Supercomprehension

Luis de Molina (1535–1600) was a Spanish Jesuit theologian well trained in the medieval scholastic tradition. He wrote on a plethora of topics including divine foreknowledge, necessity and contingency, and social justice. He is best known, however, for his contributions to the topic of divine foreknowledge, namely his development of the idea of God’s middle knowledge. Molina attempted to come to grips with how God could have absolute certainty about future contingents, and how this foreknowledge should be “reconciled with the contingency of what is known through it.” How can God know future contingents and they remain genuine future contingents? In other words, how can God know a future free decision without having determined said decision, and what is the source of this knowledge?

Molina found himself with odds at the teachings of Thomas and, especially, Duns Scotus on divine foreknowledge, human freedom, and predestination. Thomas argued that since God is outside of time all moments of time, past, present, and future, are before him as an eternal present. God’s knowledge of the future is then described in perceptual language of God looking onto all points of time and thus knowing them. As Alfred Freddoso summarizes, “Like us, God perceives what is present to Him; unlike us, He has present to Himself all past and future entities. And since perceiving something to be the case does not entail causing it to be the case, God’s knowledge of future contingents is compatible with their contingency.” However, as Thomas demonstrates in Summa Contra Gentiles, God does not passively receive information from his creation. Rather, God knows the world as his creation as an artist knows his own creation, implying that aspects of the world are not known by God simply by passive perception; they are

32 For an introduction to the life and work of Molina, see Kirk R. MacGregor, Luis de Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).
33 Molina developed this idea in Part IV of his massive work The Concordia. See Luis de Molina, On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). It is worth noting that Part IV is the only portion of the seven-part Concordia that has been translated into English. For the full critical edition, see Luis de Molina, Libri Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione Concordia, ed. Johann Rabeneck (Oña and Madrid: Collegium Maximum, 1953).
intentionally put there by the Creator. Thomas noted multiple times that the creation is not a cause of God’s knowledge of it, and Molina picked up on this.\textsuperscript{36}

Molina also sees a problem with John Dun Scotus’s position on the nature of contingency. According to Scotus, “the divine will is by itself the total source of contingency.”\textsuperscript{37} In other words, the total source of contingency and future contingents is found in God’s free knowledge. If this were the case, according to Molina, that divine volition is the source of all contingency, then contingency is no more than an illusion, and God would thus be the source and author of all sorts of evil.\textsuperscript{38} In order to maintain that God has absolute certainty of future contingents, another position must be found, for there is a contradiction in the position of Thomas, and the position of Scotus marks God as the author of evil, according to Molina.

It is in response to these positions that Molina develops his theory of God’s middle knowledge. As William Lane Craig discusses, there are three logical moments in God’s knowledge. These are natural knowledge, middle knowledge, and free knowledge. Natural knowledge is God’s knowledge of all necessary truths, i.e. the laws of logic, mathematics, and all other \textit{a priori} true statements. More specifically, God does not will that these sorts of truths be true; they are innately true. “Rather, statements which are true in this moment are true by virtue of the nature of God himself and so do not depend on his will. He knows them to be true by his very nature.”\textsuperscript{39}

The third moment of God’s knowledge is free knowledge. Free knowledge is the knowledge God has \textit{subsequent} to the determination of his will to create. In other words, God knows that which he has willed, including that which he has willed will happen. The truth value of these propositions, unlike those of natural knowledge, are determined by divine volition. God’s will is the determining factor of the truth value of these sorts of propositions.\textsuperscript{40}

Middle knowledge, according to Molina, is the second logical moment in God’s knowledge, for it is logically subsequent to God’s natural knowledge and logically prior to God’s free knowledge, “by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice, He saw in His own essence what each such faculty would do with its innate freedom were it to be


\textsuperscript{37} \textsc{Molina}, \textit{On Divine Foreknowledge}, 87. See also John Duns \textsc{Scotus}, \textit{Ordinatio}: I, dist. 2, q. 2; I, dist. I, q. 5; I, dist. 39; and II, dist. 1, q. 3.

\textsuperscript{38} \textsc{Molina}, \textit{On Divine Foreknowledge}, 130–44; esp. 139.

\textsuperscript{39} William Lane \textsc{Craig}, \textit{The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom} (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 129.

\textsuperscript{40} \textsc{Craig}, \textit{Only Wise God}, 129.
placed in this or in that or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.” Kirk MacGregor summarizes Molina’s definition: “Middle knowledge is God’s knowledge of all things that would happen in every possible set of circumstances, both things that are determined to occur by those circumstances and things that are not determined to occur by those circumstances. This knowledge was possessed by God logically or explanatorily prior to his decision to create the world or his making of any choices about what kind of world, if any, he would create.”

Another way of understanding God’s middle knowledge would be understanding it as conditional or counterfactual knowledge. God knows all conditional propositions, which take on the form if $A$ then $B$. God knows with certainty any free decision $B$ that any of his free creatures would make if placed in circumstance $A$. In other words, if God’s free creature were in circumstance $A$ then she would freely make decision $B$. Here is an example: Prior to any determination in his will to create me, God knew that if ($A$) I were ever put in a circumstance where I would have the option to eat a Manny Randazzo cream-cheese filled king cake, then ($B$) I would capitalize on this blessed opportunity. God’s will does not influence my free decision to make this choice, but God does know with certainty that I would act in such-and-such a way in such-and-such a circumstance. But how can God know with certainty if $A$ then $B$ if $A$ has yet to obtain? Molina grounds God’s middle knowledge in what has come to be termed his supercomprehension.

According to Molina, all of creation is an extension of God’s essence via his omnipotence. In other words, all of creation is an extension of God’s power, and since we traditionally understand that God is his attributes, then to be an extension of God’s power is to be an extension of his essence. Supercomprehension is understood by Molina as

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42 MacGregor, Luis de Molina, 11, emphasis mine. I emphasize would in order to distinguish it from could. Middle knowledge is not God’s knowledge of what his free creatures could do; God would know this in his natural knowledge. Middle knowledge is God’s knowledge of what his free creatures would freely choose to do in such-and-such circumstances.
43 Since divine supercomprehension serves as the grounds for God’s middle knowledge, a specific theory of time, and consequently God’s relationship to time, is not necessary. One can affirm an A-theory of time or a B-theory of time, as well can she affirm a view of God having a genuine relationship to and within time as well as God being completely outside of time. See Molina, On Divine Foreknowledge, 98–110. Though Molina himself affirmed the view of divine timelessness, implicating a B-theory of time, other philosophers and theologians following him who affirm his doctrines of middle knowledge and supercomprehension have not always done so, such as William Lane Craig. See William Lane Craig, Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).
Through His natural knowledge God comprehends Himself, and in Himself He comprehends all the things that exist eminently in Him and thus the free choice of any creature whom He is able to make through His omnipotence. Therefore, before any free determination of His will, by virtue of the depth of His natural knowledge, by which He infinitely surpasses each of the things He contains eminently in Himself, He discerns what the free choice of any creature would do by its own innate freedom, given the hypothesis that He should create it in this or that order of things with these or those circumstances or aids—even though the creature could, if it so willed, refrain from acting or do the opposite, and even though if it was going to do so, as it is able to freely, God would foresee that very act and not the one that He in fact foresees would be performed by that creature.44

Prior to any decision to create, God knows every possible free creature he could create, and every possible circumstance in which they could ever find themselves, i.e. natural knowledge. He then knows what they would freely choose to do in any of these possible circumstances. He knows this because of his supercomprehension of their essences. Since each creaturely essence is an extension of the divine essence, God comprehends these essences so completely that he knows what they would freely choose to do in any possible circumstance though they genuinely could freely choose to do otherwise.45

Molina’s doctrines of middle knowledge and supercomprehension have been subject to critique since their inception, but my aim is not to defend these doctrines against said attacks. Modern defenses and uses of Molina’s concepts can be found in the works of a number of contemporary scholars.46 For the remainder of this article, I assume middle knowledge and supercomprehension to be the case.

45 Molina’s notion of supercomprehension has been subject to criticism by Molina’s contemporaries as well as modern scholars. Kirk MacGregor has provided a very convincing defense of Molina’s doctrine of supercomprehension in a recent presentation at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in Denver, CO, 2018: “In Defense of Molina’s Doctrine of Divine Supercomprehension.”
III.2 Middle Knowledge and Supercomprehension as Basis for a Retroactive Ontology

So, how, if they can, do Molina’s concepts of middle knowledge and supercomprehension serve as a basis for a retroactive ontology? Again, retroactive ontology is the claim that the future determines and constitutes the meaning and essence of the present, though we have affirmed, along with Pannenberg, that the future does not yet exist. Middle knowledge, according to Molina, is God’s knowledge of all possibilities, or all possible worlds, and this knowledge is grounded in his supercomprehension of creaturely essences within himself.

First, I should point out that Molina’s view implicates divine conceptualism. MacGregor describes Molina’s conceptualism as “The essences or natures of things are known by God before God produces them. Since the essences or natures of things are ideas in the mind of God, and it is logically impossible for an omniscient God to exist without his ideas, God knows the essences or natures of all things before he chooses to create some of these things (namely, before he chooses to instantiate a certain set of these essences or natures).” Prior to their concrete creation, all creaturely essences, as well as abstract objects, exist as ideas, or blueprints, in the mind of God. Unlike the realism of Plato, which claimed that abstract objects existed independent of the divine mind, and unlike the nominalism of Ockham, which denied the objective reality of abstract objects, Molina posited that the essences and nature of things, such as abstract objects, objectively existed; however, they existed not independent of the divine mind but within in it. Not only do abstract objects exist within the mind of God but so do all creaturely essences. Though these essences may not be concrete they are indeed real as they really exist within God’s mind.

Since, according to Molina, all creaturely essences, natures, and possibilities, exist as concepts in the divine mind prior to their concrete creation, we can understand the future Kingdom of God as existing as a concept in the divine mind prior to its concrete becoming. Since God knows all free choices that his free creatures would make in any given circumstance via his supercomprehension of their essences, though they genuinely could choose to do otherwise, God knows all possible futures, or outcomes, of any and all possible worlds that could ever come to be. In some possible worlds, history leads up to its climax in the eschaton while in some other possible worlds it does not. In these scenarios, the future Kingdom of

47 For a contemporary case for divine conceptualism, see William Lane Craig, God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
48 MacGregor, Luis de Molina, 47. MacGregor also shows that conceptualism is rival to the realism of Plato and the nominalism of Ockham, namely on the nature of abstract objects.
God exists or does not exist as a *conceptual* reality, not as a *concrete* reality; hence, there is no explicit contradiction. Again, middle knowledge is conditional knowledge. In his supercomprehension of all creaturely essences and natures, God knows what historical futures would come about as a result of said creatures’ free choices in certain circumstances. These futures really exist as concepts in the divine mind though they do not exist outside of it. Nonetheless, these futures really exist.

Now, a future that exists *only* as a possibility does not have the ability to retroactively effect the present. In order for this to happen there would need to be a determination for said future to come about as a concrete state of affairs. This leads to the consideration of the role of God’s free knowledge in a retroactive future. Again, God’s free knowledge is God’s knowledge subsequent to the determination of his will to create, and the truth value of this knowledge is determined by divine volition. Since God knows his future Kingdom as a possibility in his middle knowledge, and should he desire to effect this state of affairs, he would then determine in his will to effect a world that consummates in this future Kingdom. His knowledge of his future Kingdom would no longer be conditional knowledge, but it would then become volitional knowledge, i.e. something God knows because he has willed to bring about the state of affairs necessary to make the proposition true. So, God knows his future Kingdom in his free knowledge as well.

Once God has determined in his will to create in such a way that it leads up to the consummation of his Kingdom in creation, this determines the rest of creation leading up to said consummation. The *telos* of a thing determines the nature of the thing. Once God has determined the outcome of history, i.e. the future Kingdom of God, this outcome exerts a form of retroactive causality over the rest of history. Consider the example of planning a road trip. Suppose someone decides to take a road trip, and she decides that she wants to drive to a specific destination, say New Orleans, Louisiana. The determined destination of the road trip has a determinative power over the process of reaching the destination. There are certain roads and interstates that lead to New Orleans and there are those that do not. If indeed the traveler has determined that New Orleans is her destination, this will cause her to choose a certain means of getting there at the exclusion of others. The destination of a journey determines the paths taken. However, the traveler would not have been able to determine her destination if said destination did not exist prior as a genuinely possible destination. Here, we can see the connection between middle knowledge and free knowledge.

Few who affirm the biblical portrait of God would deny that God has determined to consummate his Kingdom on earth, however they interpret this last part. However, God could not determine to consummate his Kingdom on earth if it were
not a genuine, or logical, possibility. God could not know anything concerning his future Kingdom volitionally did he not have prior knowledge of it conditionally. God’s middle knowledge of his future Kingdom is logically and causally prior to his free knowledge of his future Kingdom. However, God’s future Kingdom could not hold retroactive power over the present had God not determined in his will to create in such a way that the future Kingdom would come about. Though free knowledge would be impossible without middle knowledge, middle knowledge would result in nothing without free knowledge. So, why ground a retroactive ontology in middle knowledge rather than free knowledge? Because the retroactive-ontological future exists logically prior as a possibility in God’s middle knowledge via his supercomprehension of creaturely essences and natures before it exists as a volitional determination in his free knowledge.

Would this ground of a retroactive future obliterate the notion of human freedom? In short, No. In his middle knowledge, God, via supercomprehension, knows all free creatures he could create and what they would freely choose to do in any possible set of circumstances, though they genuinely could choose to do otherwise, logically prior to any determination in his will to create. He then could determine in his will to create a world in such a way that it consummates in his future Kingdom on earth without infringing upon the libertarian free will of his creatures, and all of this would be based on his supercomprehension of said creatures. Saying that the future consummation of history is determined does not necessitate that every free choice of creatures is determined. This also does not make human free agents co-determiners with God of the future; rather, it makes them co-causers of the future. God can determine the future in his will in such a way that it allows his free creatures to be co-causers, or co-creators, of said future without them having a determinative role in it. If I determined in my will to hammer a nail into a board, and I chose a hammer as my instrument with which to bring it about, the hammer serves as a cause of putting the nail into the board though it was not the determining agent; I was. The analogy is limited, but the point still stands: “to determine” is not the same as “to cause.”

So, is it possible for a nonconcrete future to hold retroactive-ontological power over the present? Yes. The future is able to hold retroactive power over the present because it exists as a concept in the divine mind both in God’s middle knowledge and free knowledge. The future of God exists first conceptually as a possibility in God’s middle knowledge, and then it exists conceptually as a volitional determination in God’s free knowledge. Because God chooses to create in such a way that he determines the future without infringing upon the libertarian freedom of his creatures, we cannot separate this conceptual future apart from his middle knowledge. Again, just because this future is not yet effected does not mean it does not exist, as it exists as a concept in the divine mind.
IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Molina’s notions of middle knowledge and divine supercomprehension provide an adequate basis to ground Pannenberg’s retroactive ontology. God has determined in his will to consummate his future Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and he has done so because this future Kingdom exists prior to said determination as a genuine possibility in his middle knowledge. His election of this future in creation exerts a retroactive-ontological power over the present, though it does not infringe upon the genuine libertarian freedom of his creatures. Not only is a retroactive-ontological future possible, and, perhaps, the case, but it also serves to inform understandings of divine providence, i.e. how God cares for and guides his creation into his future Kingdom.