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DOES MOLINISM RECONCILE FREEDOM AND FOREKNOWLEDGE?

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Abstract. John Martin Fischer has argued that Molinism does not constitute a response to the argument that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. I argue that T. Ryan Byerly's recent work on the mechanics of foreknowledge sheds light on this issue. In particular, it suggests that the Molinist might be able to reply to Fischer, but only if she can explain how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many theists affirm both that God infallibly foreknows all future events, and that human beings have incompatibilist freedom. Unfortunately, these two theses are not clearly consistent. One way to formulate the argument that is supposed to expose the inconsistency of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is as follows:

- (1) We cannot affect what God has always believed that we would do.
- (2) If we cannot affect what God has always believed that we would do, then we are not free. So,
- (3) We are not free.

The first premise seems true because we have a strong intuition that we cannot affect "hard facts" about the past, such as facts about God's past mental states. The second premise seems true because, given divine infallibility, it is necessary that we do whatever God believes we will do. So, if we have no ability to affect those divine beliefs which necessitate whatever actions we perform, then it seems that our actions are not "up to us", and that we have no alternative but to act in just the way God always believed we would. And so we are not free. I will follow the lead of other authors and call this the *Foreknowledge Argument*.

Some think that the theological position known as Molinism provides a response to the Foreknowledge Argument.¹ The Molinist holds that God's knowledge is divided into distinct logical "moments."²: First is God's 'natural knowledge' of all necessary truths and therefore the range of possible worlds that could be actual. Second is God's "middle knowledge", which features most prominently knowledge of a set of subjunctive conditionals commonly called 'counterfactuals of freedom'. Counterfactuals of freedom state what libertarianly free creatures would choose to do in various circumstances. They have the form "If person P were in circumstances C, P would freely do A." Being conditionals of libertarian freedom,

1 Fischer says: "Many people with whom I have discussed these matters have (at least initially) indicated that they think Molinism provides [a response to the Foreknowledge Argument]" (John M. Fischer, "Putting Molinism in its Place", in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (OUP, 2011), 210). Fischer goes on to cite a handful of authors who have explicitly claimed this in print: Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (OUP, 2005), 157; William L. Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Wipf and Stock, 1999), 135; Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1991), 95.

2 For an extended explication and defense of the Molinist position, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1998).

the truth values of counterfactuals of freedom are not up to God, so they restrict the possible worlds that God can actualize to a subset of “feasible worlds.”³ Third is God’s “free knowledge” of which world God freely creates. God’s free knowledge is inferred from God’s creative decree, middle knowledge, and natural knowledge, and middle knowledge plays a key role in God’s knowing what free creatures will do in the future. As the story goes, God infers from the truth of the counterfactual of freedom that P would do A in C, and God’s decree that P actually find herself in C, that P will do A.

Against those who think that Molinism is a response to the Foreknowledge Argument, John Martin Fischer accuses Molinism of merely presupposing a response to the problem, and offering instead a mechanics of God’s foreknowledge—i.e. an account of the means or mechanism by which God knows future free human actions.⁴ But, curiously, in work that is not directly concerned with Fischer’s thesis or even with Molinism per se, T. Ryan Byerly has argued that a very good way to respond to the Foreknowledge Argument is precisely to develop a mechanics of foreknowledge.⁵ This circumstance warrants examination. I will argue that, in light of Byerly’s work and a related proposal of my own that Byerly’s work inspires, the Molinist may be able to reply to Fischer’s accusation, but only if she can explain how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom.

II. FISCHER

Unlike the most widely-discussed objections to Molinism,⁶ Fischer’s complaint, by his own admission, does not threaten Molinism itself; it threatens Molinism’s usefulness for solving a particular theological problem. Specifically, Fischer denies that Molinism is useful for reconciling human freedom and divine foreknowledge. He claims that Molinism “does not in any way provide a distinctive way of responding to the fundamental argument for the incompatibility of God’s foreknowledge and human freedom.”⁷ Rather, Molinism merely presupposes a response to that argument.

Fischer defends his thesis as follows. To suppose with the Molinist that God knows true counterfactuals of freedom is to suppose something which entails that there are possible worlds where God foreknows future contingents about free human actions (barring bizarre hypotheses such as that God forgets these counterfactuals of freedom once God has chosen which world to create). But the possibility of these worlds is precisely what the Foreknowledge Argument calls into question. As Fischer notes, the Molinist might be able to defend this consequence of her view by claiming, e.g., that God’s beliefs are “soft facts”, but this, he says, would be supplementing Molinism with an independent response to the Foreknowledge Argument, namely, Ockhamism.⁸ So the Molinist hypothesis taken on its own just *presumes* that there is no inconsistency between divine foreknowledge and human freedom; it does not *show* this, much less *explain* it.

Molinism does provide at least a candidate account of how God foreknows free human actions. But Fischer points out that the notion of how God foreknows free human actions is ambiguous between a ‘nuts-and-bolts’ account of the means by which God knows the future, on the one hand, and a response to the Foreknowledge Argument, on the other hand. Molinism offers us the former, but not the latter, and that is why the Molinist ends up telling a story that presupposes, rather than shows, that freedom and foreknowledge are compatible.⁹ Fischer illustrates his point with the following analogy:

³ Flint, *Divine Providence*, 51.

⁴ John M. Fischer, “Molinism”, in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion: Vol. 1*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (OUP, 2008); John M. Fischer, “More on Molinism”, in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Eleonore Stump (Routledge, 2009); Fischer, “Putting Molinism in its Place”.

⁵ When I speak of ‘the mechanics of foreknowledge’, I am using the terminology that Byerly uses. As we will see, Fischer prefers to speak of the ‘nuts-and-bolts’ of foreknowledge.

⁶ See, e.g., William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), ch. 2. Hasker is perhaps the most prominent recent critic of Molinism.

⁷ Fischer, “Putting Molinism in its Place”, 211.

⁸ Ibid., 214.

⁹ Fischer, “Molinism”, 26.

Consider the question of how time travel is possible. A philosophical explanation would consist of knowledge that how-to manuals on time travel exist, despite the skeptical worries about the coherence of time travel. A nuts-and-bolts answer to the question would say how to go about travelling in time — first one builds a time machine and so forth. Clearly, if time travel is indeed possible, one could have the latter sort of knowledge without the former: one can read the how-to manual without knowing the answers to the skeptical worries about time travel.¹⁰

Similarly, Fischer thinks one can have a nuts-and-bolts account of divine foreknowledge without knowing the answer to the Foreknowledge Argument, and so Molinism fails to answer the Foreknowledge Argument because it only tells a nuts-and-bolts story.

Prima facie, Fischer appears to be correct.¹¹ But recent work on divine foreknowledge has introduced a strange new twist to the conversation. While Fischer says that Molinists are giving us a nuts-and-bolts story *instead* of addressing the Foreknowledge Argument, T. Ryan Byerly has recently argued that giving a nuts-and-bolts story is a *very good strategy* for addressing the Foreknowledge Argument. So let's consider Byerly's work.

III. BYERLY

In his recent book *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge and Providence: A Time-Ordering Account*, Byerly outlines in detail a story about how God foreknows free human actions, and he regards this story, and others like it, as useful for resisting the Foreknowledge Argument. But to see why Byerly thinks telling stories about how God knows the future might be useful for this purpose, we need to consider the broader program into which Byerly incorporates these stories. That broader program is a strategy for replying to the Foreknowledge Argument that does not involve disputing any particular premise or inference in the argument.¹²

Byerly begins by noting a suspicion which other authors have expressed about the Foreknowledge Argument. William Lane Craig¹³ and David Hunt¹⁴ both liken the argument to Zeno's paradoxes of motion. Though it is hard to see where Zeno's arguments against motion go wrong, the conclusion that motion is impossible is so outrageous that hardly anyone has accepted it. Similarly, though it may be hard to see where the Foreknowledge Argument goes wrong, Craig and Hunt find the idea that mere foreknowledge somehow constrains human actions incredible. Thus Craig says:

How does the addition or deletion of the factor of God's simply knowing some act in advance affect the freedom of the act? [This thesis] posits a constraint on human freedom which is entirely unintelligible. Therefore, it must be false. Somewhere there is a fallacy in the argument.¹⁵

Byerly characterizes his own project as one which is “sympathetic with the concern voiced by the foregoing authors.”¹⁶ According to Byerly, the existence of divine foreknowledge can at most *show* that human actions are not free; it cannot be what *makes* those actions not free.¹⁷ This position is more nuanced than Craig's and Hunt's; it recognizes that the Foreknowledge Argument does not actually depend on the claim that divine foreknowledge itself can make human actions unfree. Rather, Byerly makes it clear that

¹⁰ Fischer, “Putting Molinism in its Place”, 217.

¹¹ Though his argument has not gone unchallenged. Fischer, “Putting Molinism in its Place”, interacts with critiques by Thomas Flint and Michael Bergmann offered in personal correspondence.

¹² T. R. Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge and Providence: A Time-Ordering Account* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 37–38, 55.

¹³ Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 68–69.

¹⁴ David P. Hunt, “The Simple-Foreknowledge View”, in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 80–82.

¹⁵ Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 68–9. Hunt quotes this same passage with approval (“The Simple Foreknowledge View”, 81).

¹⁶ Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge*, 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 37–39.

divine foreknowledge would still be incompatible with human freedom if it requires something *else* that would make human actions unfree. The rest of his project builds on this insight.

Byerly goes on to develop the following argument as a response to the Foreknowledge Argument:

1. We are in a position to know that the foreknowledge argument is sound only if we are in a position to know that divine foreknowledge requires the existence of something which *makes* persons lack freedom.
2. We are not in a position to know that divine foreknowledge requires the existence of something which makes persons lack freedom. So,
3. We are not in a position to know that the foreknowledge argument is sound.¹⁸

In an abridged form, Byerly's case for (1) goes as follows.¹⁹ Intuitively, if some action of mine is constrained in such a way that I am not free, as the Foreknowledge Argument purports to show, then there is some reason *why* my actions are constrained in this way. So, if the presence or absence of foreknowledge makes a difference to whether or not my actions are constrained in this way, this must be because foreknowledge requires the existence of something which explains why my actions are so constrained. That is, it requires something which *makes it the case that* my actions are constrained. Therefore, divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom only if divine foreknowledge requires something that explains or makes it the case that human actions are not free. So premise (1) seems true.

Most of Byerly's book is devoted to defending premise (2). His strategy here is to argue first that causal determinism is the most likely candidate for something which is both required by divine foreknowledge and can explain why human actions are not free. But he first considers two other candidates for the job: the 'mental component' of divine foreknowledge (e.g. God's beliefs, intuitions, etc. about future free human actions), and the 'truth component' of foreknowledge (the fact that God's beliefs about future free human actions are true), and he argues that these cannot plausibly make human actions unfree. By contrast, Byerly contends that relevant parties will agree that causal determinism would make human actions unfree, and, moreover, he thinks that there is a *prima facie* powerful inductive argument that divine foreknowledge requires causal determinism (ch. 2).

The next step in Byerly's defense of premise (2) is to argue that, in fact, we do not know that divine foreknowledge requires causal determinism. He suggests two ways to defend this claim, but, for our purposes, only the strategy to which he devotes most of his attention is relevant: the strategy of telling 'conciliatory stories' about the means by which God might know the future. Conciliatory stories—a term Byerly borrows from Dougherty and Pruss²⁰—are "stories with a range of epistemic statuses falling short of epistemic justification", which offer accounts of how God foreknows free human actions, but which do not require causal determinism.²¹ If one can tell a sufficiently probable story or disjunction of stories meeting these conditions, then we who are aware of the stories will not be in a position to know that all such stories are false, and so we will not be in a position to know that foreknowledge requires causal determinism. Assuming that there are no other plausible candidates for something required by divine foreknowledge that would make human actions unfree, premise (2) would be vindicated.

That, in outline, is Byerly's strategy for defending premise (2). However, I do not think one has to buy into Byerly's claims about causal determinism to employ the conciliatory story strategy in defense of premise (2). It doesn't matter whether causal determinism is a plausible candidate for something that is both required by divine foreknowledge and that would make us unfree, much less that it is the best or only

¹⁸ Though Byerly does not formulate the argument using numbered premises as I have here, I have borrowed his exact words (*The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge*, 38), except for a few minor adjustments.

¹⁹ I think this abridged version may even be an improvement over Byerly's more extended argument because it eliminates some dispensable and potentially vulnerable steps in Byerly's own presentation.

²⁰ Trent Dougherty and Alexander R. Pruss, "Evil and the Problem of Anomaly", in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 5*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (OUP, 2014).

²¹ Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge*, 64.

such candidate. One can use Byerly's strategy to defend premise (2) directly by telling conciliatory stories in which God knows the future by means that require nothing that would make human actions unfree (causal determinism or otherwise). Given a sufficiently probable story or disjunction of stories meeting this condition, premise (2) follows.

Byerly contends that the conciliatory story strategy is more promising than the most popular alternative strategies for resisting the Foreknowledge Argument.²² He identifies a number of pitfalls that his strategy avoids and that popular strategies do not. I would add that the conciliatory story approach is also more satisfying than other lines of resistance in at least one respect because, to quote Zagzebski (1991), it "... answers the nagging query: *How does [God] do it?*"²³ For this reason, conciliatory stories can make divine foreknowledge less mysterious. So it looks like conciliatory stories may be an attractive way to meet this perennial argument.

As Byerly notes, there are a handful of attempts to tell such conciliatory stories in the literature.²⁴ Perhaps the most widely discussed is Molinism, but there is also Jonathan Kvanvig's account featuring epistemic conditionals of divine deliberation in place of subjunctive or strict conditionals,²⁵ Linda Zagzebski's story featuring a fourth spatial dimension,²⁶ and Byerly's own proposal that God knows the future by ordering the times.²⁷ In the next section I will discuss the Molinist story, but otherwise it is not my project to evaluate these stories in this paper.

It might be tempting to resist Byerly's strategy by falling back on the Foreknowledge Argument itself. One could argue that what is required by foreknowledge that makes us unfree has been lurking right beneath Byerly's nose all along. For the Foreknowledge Argument shows that the presence of divine foreknowledge places us in a situation where we are able to refrain from the actions we perform only if we are able to affect God's past beliefs—to make it the case that God has always believed something different than what God has in fact always believed. But the intuitive fixity of the past rules this out. So perhaps what foreknowledge requires that makes us unfree is that we are in a situation where we can do otherwise only if we can affect the past. In a similar vein, one could argue that, whether or not the Foreknowledge Argument reveals what divine foreknowledge requires that would make us unfree, it still shows that foreknowledge and freedom are incompatible.²⁸ For the argument rests on such powerful intuitions that we ought to conclude that no conciliatory story is metaphysically possible. Rather, we should conclude that something or other required by foreknowledge would make us unfree, whether or not we know what that something is. So perhaps the Foreknowledge Argument itself shows that the project of telling conciliatory stories is doomed to fail.²⁹

Both of these objections press Byerly on the point that conciliatory stories such as his own time-ordering story can refute the Foreknowledge Argument *indirectly*. That is, they challenge the claim that conciliatory stories can refute the Foreknowledge Argument without showing where the argument takes a misstep. For if either of the foregoing objections is right, then a conciliatory story will not succeed in showing that premise (2) in Byerly's argument is true unless the story can take the intuitive force out of one or more of the steps in the Foreknowledge Argument itself.

I'm not confident that the Foreknowledge Argument is as powerful as these objections require. At any rate, the extent to which one is moved by them will depend on the extent to which one is antecedently confident in the Foreknowledge Argument and the intuitions that motivate it. I take it that Byerly, for example, is not so confident in those intuitions that conciliatory stories such as his own time-ordering

²² Ibid., ch. 1

²³ Linda T. Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (OUP, 1991), 177.

²⁴ Zagzebski's proposal is my own addition to Byerly's list.

²⁵ Jon Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (OUP, 2011), ch. 8.

²⁶ Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, 172–179.

²⁷ T. R. Byerly, "God Knows the Future by Ordering the Times", in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 5*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (OUP, 2014); and Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge*.

²⁸ Thus, using Byerly's distinction between showing vs. making us not free against him.

²⁹ Thanks to two referees for these objections. Michael Almeida also raises this issue in his review of Byerly's book: "Review of *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge and Providence*", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77 no. 3 (2015): 255–259.

story have no significant effect on his credence about the compatibility of freedom and foreknowledge. And I doubt Byerly is alone here. But still, some philosophers will be moved by these objections, and so it would be much better for Byerly if there were another way to employ conciliatory stories such as his own time-ordering story against that argument — a way on which conciliatory stories could, at least in principle, engage with the Foreknowledge Argument directly.

Byerly may be in luck. It seems to me that a well-crafted conciliatory story can engage directly with the Foreknowledge Argument by undermining the case for one or more of its premises. I will argue this in two steps. First, I will argue that a successful conciliatory story will engage with a specific premise in the Foreknowledge Argument, and second, I will argue that a well-crafted story can, at least in principle, undermine the intuitive support for that premise.

We've seen that Byerly explicitly denies that his conciliatory story strategy challenges a certain step in the Foreknowledge Argument. He says this because he uses conciliatory stories to support a step in his indirect attack on the Foreknowledge Argument that I outlined above. But I will suggest that a conciliatory story *itself* might engage with a particular premise in the foreknowledge argument, independently of any role it plays in Byerly's indirect objection to that argument.³⁰

To see that a conciliatory story can do precisely this, consider what such a story is supposed to do, according to Byerly. It is supposed to explain the means by which God could infallibly foreknow free human actions. As such, it is supposed to be an account of the way in which God's beliefs manage to infallibly track future actions, even actions which agents could have refrained from performing. It seems to me that any complete conciliatory story of this sort would either be a story about how free human actions could affect God's past beliefs about those actions — contrary to the first premise of the Foreknowledge Argument, as I formulated it above — or it will be a story about how God's beliefs manage to infallibly track genuinely free actions even though those actions cannot "reach back into the past" to affect them — contrary to the second premise of the Foreknowledge Argument. It is very hard to see how a satisfactory conciliatory story about foreknowledge could fail to do at least one of these two things. It follows that any satisfactory conciliatory story will run afoul of one or another of the Foreknowledge Argument's premises.

But can such a story hope to undermine the intuitive case for the premise that it violates? I think so. To see how it might do this, consider the following case. Imagine a student who is only beginning to learn about the free will debate in philosophy. She reflects on a number of cases where an agent is unable to do otherwise and finds that she consistently has the intuition that, in these cases, the agent is not morally responsible for what the agent did. For example, it seems to the student that an agent who is tied securely to a chair and tries, unsuccessfully, to free herself, cannot be held responsible for failing to get up from the chair to help a nearby needy individual. So, initially, the student comes to believe that people are morally responsible for their actions only if they could have done otherwise. But now imagine that our student encounters a Frankfurt case for the first time. Finding it persuasive, she revises her views. She no longer endorses the thesis that an agent is responsible for an action the agent performs only if the agent could have done otherwise.

How shall we characterize what happens in this scenario to the intuitive support that the student once took herself to have for the thesis that agents are free only if they could have done otherwise? Does the Frankfurt case simply overwhelm, in a Moorean sort of way, the intuitive support for that thesis? I don't think so. For surely the student will still think it is intuitively correct that an agent who is tied down to a chair and tries but fails to get free is not morally responsible for remaining in the chair. Even after encountering the Frankfurt case, the student will want to endorse this position on the basis of the intuitions that undergird it. A more plausible account of what happens is that the Frankfurt case constitutes a counterexample to the thesis that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise *without* clashing with the intuitions that the student took to support that thesis. So, instead of rejecting those in-

³⁰ My proposal is inspired, at least in part, by Byerly's work, where hints of it can be found — e.g. his suggestion that Trenton Merricks could appeal to a mechanics of foreknowledge to defend a certain objection to a premise in the Foreknowledge Argument. See T. R. Byerly, "Do God's Beliefs about the Future Depend on the Future?", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015).

tuiitions as untrustworthy, the student responds to the Frankfurt case by reassessing the content of those intuitions. The Frankfurt case leads her to realize that the intuitions in question do not support the thesis that she thought they did, though perhaps they support some nearby thesis, one that entails, e.g., that an agent who tries but fails to get out of a chair is not morally responsible for remaining in the chair, and yet allows that agents in Frankfurt cases are responsible for their actions.

Similarly, it seems that a conciliatory story could, at least in principle, challenge a premise in the Foreknowledge Argument by leading us to reinterpret our intuitions regarding that premise, just as a Frankfurt case can challenge a principle about moral responsibility by leading one to reinterpret the intuitions one took to support that principle. For example, imagine that I present a conciliatory story that provides an account of how we manage to affect God's past beliefs. Despite strong intuitions about the fixity of the past, the story strikes you as intuitively possible. It does so because, although it violates the premise in the Foreknowledge Argument which is supposed to be supported by fixity-of-the-past intuitions, it does not seem to clash with the intuitions themselves. Therefore, the story leads you to reinterpret those intuitions—to conclude that they do not, after all, support the premise that you took them to support. On closer inspection, they turn out to support a subtly different thesis about the fixity of the past, one which is qualified in such a way that it is consistent with the story I've told about how we affect God's past beliefs. In this way, a conciliatory story could sap the Foreknowledge Argument of its apparent force.

But of course, all I have argued so far is that a conciliatory story could, in principle, refute the Foreknowledge Argument by leading us to reinterpret relevant intuitions. This is, in effect, to argue that a conciliatory story could constitute a counterexample to a premise in the Foreknowledge Argument. Whether there is any real chance of such a story being concocted is another matter. How seriously should we take the possibility that a conciliatory story might refute the Foreknowledge Argument in the way I've described?

I'm convinced that we should take it very seriously indeed. The Foreknowledge Argument remains very controversial. However intuitively powerful it may be, many philosophers think that there are reasons—philosophical reasons as well as reasons based in revelation and tradition—to be suspicious of it. So, at the very least, it seems reasonable for critics of the Foreknowledge Argument to attempt the project of developing conciliatory stories of the sort described above. Moreover, it is common in philosophy for some plausible thesis to be overturned by a clever story or example which shows that the intuitions one took to support the thesis do not support that thesis after all. For that reason, it seems to me that even a fan of the Foreknowledge Argument who is justifiably confident that the argument is sound should still take conciliatory stories seriously when they are offered.

IV. A REPLY TO FISCHER?

Byerly is not a Molinist, but even so, has he given Molinists and their sympathizers a way to reply to Fischer? Fischer charged Molinism with merely presupposing a response to the Foreknowledge Argument, and offering instead only a nuts-and-bolts story about how God knows the future. But as we have just seen, Byerly has argued that nuts-and-bolts stories can be used to challenge the Foreknowledge Argument, and I have argued that they may be capable of challenging it in an even more direct way than Byerly himself supposes. Since, by Fischer's own admission, Molinism is just such a story, and since Molinists and their sympathizers clearly do not think it is an implausible story, can they respond to the Foreknowledge Argument by taking Byerly's Way Out? And can they claim that Molinism, being a distinctive conciliatory story, amounts to a distinctive response to the Foreknowledge Argument?

We must tread carefully here. There are at least two different senses in which it might be the case that Molinism “does not in any way provide a distinctive way of responding to the fundamental argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom.”³¹ On the one hand, Molinism

³¹ Fischer, “Putting Molinism in its Place”, 211.

might fail to provide a distinctive reason to reject a particular premise or inference in the Foreknowledge Argument. On the other hand, Molinism might fail to provide a distinctive way of showing that the Foreknowledge Argument fails to establish its conclusion (for some reason or other). These are clearly not the same: the former places stricter, more demanding requirements on a response to the Foreknowledge Argument than the latter does, since the former requires showing exactly where the argument goes wrong, and the latter does not.

Plugging Molinism into Byerly's indirect attack on the Foreknowledge Argument might prove effective against that argument in the less strict sense, at least for those who are unmoved by the objection that the Foreknowledge Argument itself is potent enough to render Byerly's indirect strategy unsuccessful. But if I am right that conciliatory stories can be used to attack the Foreknowledge Argument directly, then Molinism might turn out to refute that argument even in the stricter sense. This kind of refutation is desirable, because it would be more satisfying to see exactly what is wrong the Foreknowledge Argument, and because there are places where Fischer emphasizes the point that Molinism doesn't show us precisely where the Foreknowledge Argument goes wrong.³² Moreover, if one can show that Molinism refutes the Foreknowledge Argument in the stricter sense, it will follow that it also refutes it in the less strict sense.

So, does Molinism refute, or at least pose a significant challenge to, the Foreknowledge Argument, either in the stricter sense or even merely the less strict sense? Unfortunately for Molinists, I do not think it does. The Molinist's conciliatory story does not seem to me to blunt the force of the Foreknowledge Argument either directly or indirectly. Indeed, I take it this is why Fischer's objection to Molinism enjoys the plausibility that it does.

However, I do not think that Molinism fails in this regard because it is an unsuccessful conciliatory story—a story that, though fully fleshed out, simply doesn't do what the conciliatory strategist hopes such a story will do. Rather, I think the reason for Molinism's failure in this regard is more interesting than that—more interesting because it suggests that Molinism still has a chance of one day constituting a forceful response to the Foreknowledge Argument, even if it does not do so in its present state. The problem with Molinism in its present state is that it does not offer a sufficiently *complete* conciliatory story.

If one can tell a story about how God knows the future, then presumably one can tell part of such a story. And a part of a conciliatory story may not be able to do things that a whole story can do. In particular, a story that is insufficiently detailed, or which leaves out crucial steps, may fail to significantly reduce our perplexity about how God knows the future, even if we are willing to grant that the story is true. Let's say that any such conciliatory story is *incomplete*. It is not surprising that an incomplete story about how God knows the future fails to seriously challenge the Foreknowledge Argument. But—and this is particularly plausible in the case of an independently motivated story like Molinism—the story might very well change our intuitions about the Foreknowledge Argument if it were completed.

I say the Molinist's story is incomplete. Here's why. Middle knowledge plays the starring role in the Molinist's story about how God foreknows free human actions. But Molinism does not include an account of how God comes by God's middle knowledge, and this seems like a crucial omission, which should leave us at best unsure whether the Molinist story is a plausible explanation of how God might know the future.

Some authors have argued that there is no suitable means by which God could possibly know true counterfactuals of freedom.³³ And this problem—the problem of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom—is very similar to the problem of how God foreknows free human actions. In both cases we are presented with the puzzle of how God can know about free choices that have not occurred and are not causally determined by what has occurred. So, by trading the problem about foreknowledge for the strikingly similar problem about middle knowledge, the Molinist's conciliatory story does something akin to

³² E.g., *ibid.* 213.

³³ E.g. Katherin A. Rogers, "Omniscience, Eternity, and Freedom", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1996); Hugh McCann, "The Free Will Defense", in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (OUP, 2011).

pushing the original problem back a step, rather than solving it. At any rate, we exchange one problem for another, similar problem that is at least as difficult to solve as the original.³⁴

This would not be so bad if middle knowledge were ‘common ground’ in the foreknowledge debate. A conciliatory story that explained God’s foreknowledge in terms of knowledge that all parties agree God has at God’s disposal, such as God’s natural knowledge, could be a dialectically strong response to the Foreknowledge Argument even if we had no idea how God comes by God’s natural knowledge. But middle knowledge is a unique commitment of the Molinist’s mechanics of foreknowledge.³⁵ So if there is any serious worry about whether there is a means by which God could know true counterfactuals of freedom, then it seems that a complete or satisfactory conciliatory story starring middle knowledge should at least do something to assuage this worry.³⁶

The Molinist might protest that there is no story to tell about how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom. God knows them, but God’s manner of knowing doesn’t involve any ‘nuts-and-bolts’, so to speak.³⁷ But as Katherin Rogers points out, if this is an acceptable response to the question of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom, then we could have said the same about God’s foreknowledge of free human choices in the first place: God foreknows free human actions, but there is nothing to say about how God foreknows them.³⁸ This would threaten to render Molinism superfluous as a response to the Foreknowledge Argument. For it is at best not clear that a version of Molinism on which middle knowledge is inexplicable has any advantages with respect to responding to the Foreknowledge Argument over a view which skips middle knowledge and claims that foreknowledge is inexplicable. And if it has no such advantages, this would call back into question the claim that Molinism’s conciliatory story is a “distinctive response” to the Foreknowledge Argument.

Denying that there is any answer to questions about how God knows things is inadequate, and I suspect that its appeal is due in large part to the conflation of two distinct notions: the notion that God’s knowledge is inexplicable (which is false); and the notion that God’s knowledge is unmediated (which may be true). While God’s mind might enjoy a kind of unmediated contact with the world, God’s mind and the world must still be related such that God’s beliefs are not true merely by accident.³⁹ So what kind of relation is this? Causation? Grounding? And which aspects of the world cause or ground God’s beliefs about counterfactuals of freedom (and do so in such a way that, necessarily, God believes a counterfactual of freedom if and only if it is true)? These are the sorts of questions the Molinist needs to answer to fill out her conciliatory story. Maybe they will be easy for the Molinist to answer; maybe not. Either way, until more of these details are filled in, the Molinist has not finished telling us how God knows the future.

I conclude that the Molinist’s conciliatory story is incomplete as it currently stands. For that reason, it offers at best only the rudiments of a distinctive response to the Foreknowledge Argument. But, in a way, this verdict is a hopeful one for the Molinist. For while Molinism has been so ineffective against the Foreknowledge Argument up to this point that a leading author in the field has been able to charge it with providing no distinctive response to that argument, my verdict of incompleteness suggests that this failure might eventually be overcome. It remains to be seen whether a *complete* Molinist conciliatory story can refute the Foreknowledge Argument.

³⁴ Cf. Rogers, “Omniscience, Eternity, and Freedom”, who also notes that the problems are similar.

³⁵ Obviously open theists reject Middle Knowledge, but there are many advocates of foreknowledge who reject it as well. On the other hand, I know of only one author who has suggested that God might have middle knowledge but lack exhaustive foreknowledge: Rik Peels, “Can God Repent?”, in *Oxford studies in philosophy of religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (OUP, 2016).

³⁶ Thanks to Mike Rota for pressing me to think about whether there is an important parity between the problem of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom and how God knows, e.g. that $2+2=4$.

³⁷ I have often encountered this sort of reaction in conversation.

³⁸ Rogers, “Omniscience, Eternity, and Freedom”, 403.

³⁹ Rogers presses more or less the same point in “Omniscience, Eternity, and Freedom”, though she speaks specifically of a ‘causal story ... relating the knowledge of a proposition to the fact on which the truth value of the proposition depends’ (Rogers, “Omniscience, Eternity, and Freedom”, 400).

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us? As we saw, Fischer argues that Molinism does not provide a ‘distinctive response’ to the Foreknowledge Argument. The foregoing discussion suggests that he may be right given Molinism as it presently stands, but even if that is so, he may be right for the wrong reason. For Molinism might be the beginnings of a successful conciliatory story, and so the rudiments of a distinctive response to the Foreknowledge Argument after all. It is too soon to say, because the Molinist’s conciliatory story is incomplete. To complete it, the Molinist needs to provide a (plausible) mechanics of middle knowledge—a nuts-and-bolts account of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom. If she can accomplish this, then she may find that she has a reply to Fischer.⁴⁰

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