

Optimistic Molinism

Divine Reasons and Salvifically Optimal Worlds

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ABSTRACT: Some Molinists claim that a perfectly good God would actualize a world that is salvifically optimal, that is, a world in which the balance between the saved and damned is optimal and cannot be improved upon without undesirable consequences. I argue that given some plausible principles of rationality, alongside the assumptions Molinists already accept, God's perfect rationality necessarily would lead him to actualize a salvifically optimal world; I call this position "Optimistic Molinism." I then consider objections and offer replies, concluding that Optimistic Molinism is undefeated (for now) and merits further exploration.

In this paper, I assume that the concept of divine middle knowledge is coherent and focus on exploring issues dealing with the practical aspects of Molinism, in particular those relating to divine providence. Molinists believe that God desires the salvation of all people, and some leading Molinists claim that a perfectly good God would actualize a world that is salvifically optimal, that is, a world in which the balance between the saved and damned is optimal and cannot be improved upon without undesirable consequences.¹ I argue that given some plausible principles of rationality, alongside the assumptions that Molinists already accept, God's perfect rationality would lead him to actualize a salvifically optimal world. I will call this position "Optimistic Molinism." In the key section of the paper, I make the case that God actualizes a salvifically optimal world out of necessity. I then consider objections and offer replies, concluding that Optimistic Molinism is undefeated.

1. Molinism and Salvifically Optimal Worlds

Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what every possible human would freely do in any possible circumstance logically prior to his creative decree, and God uses this knowledge to actualize a world of his choice. Given the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (CCFs) which are independent of God's will, some worlds are outside of God's power to actualize. Gen-

1. In this essay, the term *world(s)* means logically possible worlds, and I will use *universe(s)* when referring to a concrete spatiotemporal world. Also, I use *actualize* and *create* interchangeably.

erally, Molinists think that it is possible that a world containing moral good but no moral evil is an infeasible world for God to actualize; possibly, every human would freely perform at least one evil action, fall into sin, and become in need of salvation.²

Leaving aside the debate over whether or not a morally perfect God had to initiate a plan of salvation, it is unquestionable that God in fact has initiated such a plan. Molinists believe that God wants to save as many people as possible, that is, God wants to maximize salvific goodness—call this the Maximality Thesis. In the next section I show that Molinists are committed to this thesis.

1.1. *The Maximality Thesis*

Molinists appeal to the numerous biblical passages that *prima facie* teach God's desire to save all people (Ezek. 18:23–32; 33:11; 1 Tim. 2:4; Tit. 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9), his provision of the Atonement for all people (1 Tim. 2: 5–6; 4:10; 1 John 2:2), and his genuine offer of the gospel to all people (Matt. 28:19–20; John 3:16). Additionally, Molinists argue that a God who is unsurpassable in love would be concerned not only with the temporary flourishing of humans he brings into existence, but more importantly, with their ultimate flourishing and well-being that can only found in eternal communion with him. Kirk MacGregor underlines this point in Luis de Molina's thought:

Confronted with his middle knowledge of what every possible individual would freely do in every conceivable set of circumstances, God commits himself, out of his love, to consider for creation only those feasible worlds in which he offers sufficient grace for salvation (i.e., prevenient grace) to each individual. Thus, in keeping with the set of texts asserting God's universal salvific will, God eliminates from consideration any feasible world in which he offers prevenient grace only to some individuals, thereby moving their wills alone in a salvific direction.³

Molinists believe that free will is a great good—either as an intrinsic or an instrumental good—and God endows humans with freedom (understood to be incompatible with determinism) in order to make it possible for them freely to bring about moral good. But as the Free Will Defense claims to show, the possibility of moral good entails the possibility of moral evil. I think this suggests that only *moral* good can counterbalance and outweigh *moral* evil.⁴

2. This is the controversial thesis of transworld-depravity, the doctrine that possibly, every creaturely essence, if instantiated, would freely go wrong with respect to some moral action. See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 48.

3. Kirk MacGregor, *Luis de Molina* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 145.

4. I think it is reasonable that an instance of moral evil cannot be outweighed (or counterbalanced) by nonmoral goods. I find it counterintuitive that God could outweigh an instance

Perhaps the kind of good that can outweigh human rebellion and rejection of God has to be a moral good, a good that results from a person's salvation (both in the process of justification and sanctification)—this is what I mean by *salvific* goodness. It is plausible that salvific goodness would play a prominent factor in God's deliberation over which evil-containing world to actualize.

On Molinism, one reason why God is unable to save all—even though he genuinely desires universal salvation—is due to the true CCFs. As William Lane Craig points out: “God is supposed to be omnibenevolent, and it seems difficult to deny that He would be more benevolent if He were to save all persons rather than just some, should this lie within His power”; thus, *ceteris paribus*, if God could save all, he would save all.⁵ MacGregor makes a similar claim: “If there existed a feasible world where all the lost people in this world were freely saved and all the saved people in this world remained freely saved, God would have created it.”⁶ Although God cannot save all, he does what he can to save as many as possible. Molinists who affirm that God desires to maximize salvific goodness in those worlds that he initiates redemption accept the Maximality Thesis, and they think God maximizes salvific goodness by actualizing a world that is salvifically optimal.

1.2. *The Possibility Thesis*

The Possibility Thesis states that it is possible that a salvifically optimal world was available for God to actualize. Molinists are not saying that the actual world is in fact salvifically optimal; they are only suggesting that the concept of such a world is possible, that is, the denial of this concept is not self-contradictory and thus not internally incoherent.⁷ For example, Craig

of moral evil (e.g., murder) in that world simply by creating, say, more flowers or animals in that world thereby increasing aesthetic goodness. So if moral good is incommensurable with nonmoral good with respect to value, this might be a reason why such a counterbalancing is implausible.

5. William Lane Craig, “Middle Knowledge and Christian Exclusivism,” *Sophia* 34 (1995): 125. I include the *ceteris paribus* clause because possibly there could be worlds containing universal salvation in which only a handful of people are saved. Craig has argued that such worlds might not be preferable to God over worlds in which some are damned but multitudes are saved. See Craig, “No Other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 182. For a critique of this view, see Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 178–84. I discuss MacDonald's criticism later.

6. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 249. A referee raised an objection to this point, which I address later.

7. Molinists might add that salvifically optimal worlds are *conceivable*, and their conceivability lends support to their possibility. MacGregor writes that the idea that God *has* actualized a salvifically optimal world “is almost certainly implicit” in Molina's thought; see MacGregor, “Harmonizing Molina's Rejection of Transworld Damnation with Craig's Solution to the Problem of the Unevangelized,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 84 (2018): 347.

writes: "I am saying that it is possible that there is no feasible world involving a more optimal balance between saved and unsaved than the actual world."⁸ Craig employs the Possibility Thesis in response to the so-called soteriological problem of evil (the claim that the existence of a perfectly good God is incompatible with some persons being damned), and regarding the premise that contains the Possibility Thesis, Craig explicitly indicates that it need not be plausible or true; it only needs to be possible.⁹ I will quote a key passage from Craig to serve as a sample of how Molinists usually conceive of salvifically optimal worlds:

We have seen that it is possible that God wants to maximize the number of the saved. He wants heaven to be as full as possible. Yet a loving God wants to minimize the number of the lost. He wants hell to be as empty as possible. His goal, then, is to achieve an optimal balance, to create no more lost than is necessary to actualize a certain number of the saved. But it is possible that the balance in the actual world is such an optimal balance. It is possible that in order to create the number of persons in our world who will be saved, God had to create the number of persons who will be lost. It is possible that the terrible price of filling heaven is the filling of hell as well, and that in any other possible world the balance between saved and lost would have been worse or the same. . . . Even if God could have achieved a better ratio between saved and lost, it is possible that in order to better the ratio between them, God would have had to reduce the number of the saved so drastically as to leave heaven deficient in population (say, by creating a world of only four people, three of whom would go to heaven and one to hell). It is possible that in order to achieve a multitude of saints, God had to accept an even greater multitude of sinners.¹⁰

Here also is a summary of Molina's thinking on salvifically optimal worlds:

- (a) God is perfectly good and thus considers actualizing only those feasible worlds that have an optimal salvific balance.¹¹

8. Craig, "Middle Knowledge and Christian Exclusivism," n31.

9. Craig, "No Other Name," 183. Cf. Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 150. Also, see MacGregor, "Harmonizing Molina's Rejection of Transworld Damnation with Craig's Solution to the Problem of the Unevangelized," 349; Henric David Peels, "Divine Foreknowledge and Eternal Damnation: The Theory of Middle Knowledge as Solution to the Soteriological Problem of Evil," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 48 (2006): 171. At least one critic of Molinism admits that he sees no way to rule out the Possibility Thesis on grounds that it is logically impossible. See William Hasker, "Middle Knowledge and the Damnation of The Heathen: A Response to William Craig," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 381.

10. Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 149. Keathley approves of Craig's suggestion in *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 153. Cf. John D. Laing, *Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2018), 174.

11. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 145. MacGregor adds: "God's choice of a salvifically optimal world, for Molina, follows deductively from God's choice to create humans in the *imago Dei* and God's omnibenevolence" (145–6n53).

- (b) God is perfectly good and thus it is logically impossible for him to desire to actualize a world less than the salvifically optimal.¹²
- (c) The range of salvifically optimal worlds is infinite.¹³
- (d) No reason can be given why God selects one salvifically optimal world over the others except for his sovereign will.¹⁴

On the Molinist picture, God's process of choosing a world for actualization might look something like the following. First, God deliberates and decides if he wants to bring into existence contingent beings, and if so, whether or not those contingent beings will be rational, moral, and free. Then, God decides to create human beings that are both rational and moral, and as Molinists argue, free in the libertarian sense. Via his middle knowledge, God knows the true CCFs and the worlds that are available for him to actualize. God knows that worlds in which humans possess libertarian freedom are worlds which contain evil and sin.¹⁵ Of course, God could refrain from actualizing any of these worlds, for example, if he knows they are on-balance evil, and instead actualize a world in which he causally determines human actions or refrains from creating humans at all. So if God decides to actualize a world populated with people who freely fall into sin, the Molinist argues that a perfectly good God would desire the salvation of all people, and thus he would desire to maximize salvific goodness by actualizing a salvifically optimal world.

Admittedly, I don't know of a way to demonstrate that salvifically optimal worlds are possible besides appealing to their conceivability and *prima facie* coherence, so it would be nice if Molinists could provide additional reasons on behalf of the Possibility Thesis. Unless there are good arguments to reject the Possibility Thesis—and so far, I'm not aware of any such arguments in the literature—Molinists think they are reasonable in affirming the thesis. But suppose critics of Molinism think they can formulate an argument against Molinism by rejecting the Possibility Thesis. (Perhaps even some Molinists might be inclined to reject this thesis.) In the next section, I briefly consider three possible objections that aim to show the incoherence of the Possibility Thesis.

2. Objections to the Possibility Thesis

First, the critic might wonder why God couldn't add more saved people to a world thereby actualizing a salvifically better world. Supposedly, there are an infinite number of possible persons, and God knows all the true CCFs

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 148, 257.

14. *Ibid.*, 150.

15. As Craig notes, "Given His will to create a world of free creatures, God must accept that some will be lost" (Craig, "No Other Name," 185).

about them, including which people would freely be saved. Thus, God could increase the salvific goodness of world A, which results in a better world B. But then for every salvifically good world, God could actualize a better one, given the infinite number of true CCFs available to him. The critic concludes that the concept of a salvifically optimal world is incoherent. Thus, the Possibility Thesis is false.

This objection assumes that it is within God's control to manipulate which true CCFs are included in which world. But if a possible world is a maximal state of affairs,¹⁶ then God can't somehow add more CCFs to a world and arrange them to increase salvific goodness in that world. So Molinists should deny the possibility suggested in the objection. The Molinist might also question the assumption that maximizing salvific goodness is merely a matter of increasing the number of saved people in the world. God is also concerned with the kind of people they become after salvation as manifested by their degree of sanctification, and this consideration should make the critic hesitate to claim that salvific goodness could be increased by adding saved people to the world.¹⁷

The critic then raises a second objection: after reaching an optimal salvific balance in universe (not world) E, why couldn't God create another universe, F, and maximize salvific goodness in that universe until no more saved people could be added without diminishing the optimal balance, and then repeat this process for universes G, H, I, and so on? Again, since there is an infinite number of true CCFs, and thus an infinite number of persons who would freely accept salvation, God could continue adding salvifically optimal universes to the multiverse. This shows that there is not a salvifically optimal world. Thus, the Possibility Thesis is false.

On the one hand, if this multiverse scenario in the objection is possible, it actually proves the Possibility Thesis, for the infinite collection of salvifically optimal universes would constitute a salvifically optimal world; there would be no other possible world that has a better balance. On the other hand, it is possible that there could be salvifically optimal universes that contain some of the same people, but since a person could exist only in one universe, God could not create salvifically optimal universes that contain the same people. Consequently, God could not create all salvifically optimal universes to be part of the multiverse, and so it's possible that some multiverse be salvifically optimal.¹⁸ Either way, The Possibility Thesis remains intact.

16. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 45.

17. Thanks to MacGregor for pointing this out to me in personal correspondence. He thinks that salvific optimality isn't just about doing the math and that other considerations come into play, considerations we know nothing about. Accordingly, "the concept of a salvifically optimal world is coherent if and only if God knows the answer to any hypothetical 'Which world, if any, is better' type of question, and I propose that an omniscient being knows this answer."

18. Although I came across this last reply in a different context, it could be employed here. This point is from Nevin Climenhaga, "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 97 (2018): 374.

Both of these objections assume that calculating the value of salvific goodness is possible, but this assumption itself could be challenged.¹⁹ If this calculation involves weighing the value of persons against each other, and each person created in the image of God has immeasurable worth, such a calculation seems not only improbable, but cold-blooded on God's part. In response, I want to point out that what is being measure and calculated here is not the worth of each person, but the value of the states of affairs resulting from a person's salvation or damnation. Surely, God could measure the value of the state of affairs of, say, one hundred people experiencing eternal bliss is greater than the state of affairs of one person doing so, or that the state of affairs of one vicious act is lesser than one virtuous act. Even if finite humans cannot fathom how to calculate salvific goodness, it's plausible to think that an omniscient God can. It should be kept in mind that the idea of a salvifically optimal world was provided as a mere possibility in a premise answering the soteriological problem of evil. The Possibility Thesis served as part of a defense, not a theodicy, and thus it only needs to be possibly true that there are salvifically optimal worlds. To show that such worlds are not possible, the critic must demonstrate that the thesis is necessarily false, and these objections fall short of establishing this.²⁰ But I invite non-Molinists to devise other objections to test the coherence of the Possibility Thesis. I also invite Molinists to offer more substantial replies than I provide here.

Suppose that the Possibility Thesis is shown to be false, that is, it is not possible that there be a salvifically optimal world—what consequences follow? Below, I mention two problems that arise for Molinists which are better avoided.

First, if the idea of a salvifically optimal world is incoherent, Molinism loses some of its explanatory power. At first glance, this loss may seem unproblematic. But Molinists put considerable amount of weight on Molinism's ability to make sense of a wide range of theological data and reconcile biblical verses that appear inconsistent with each other.²¹ Craig thinks it likely that it is on the basis of these practical considerations that Molinism will either stand or fall.²² Molinism is already contested both on philosophical and theological grounds, so it would be a major setback if it lost some of its explanatory prowess.

Second, if the Possibility Thesis turned out to be false, the Maximality Thesis would have to be rejected as well. Molinists see God's perfect goodness (along with the teachings of Scripture) as evidence for the claim that God *prima facie* desires to maximize salvific goodness as much as possible. But if

19. I'm grateful to a referee for raising this objection.

20. For, *not possibly P* is equivalent to *necessarily, not P* in modal logic.

21. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 249. Keathley agrees: "the way it [Molinism] effectively synchronizes some of the most difficult biblical concepts makes Molinism very attractive" (Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 12).

22. Craig, "Middle Knowledge and Christian Exclusivism," 121.

the Possibility Thesis is false, then for any salvifically good world, it is within God's power to actualize a salvifically better world. On this scenario, God is faced with two options: (a) actualize a salvifically good-enough world, knowing that he could have actualized a better one or (b) refrain from actualizing a world in which he offers salvation. But (b) is false, for we live in a world in which God *has* offered salvation. That leaves (a), and (a) undermines the Maximality Thesis because God does not do everything possible to maximize salvation; if (a) is true, God satisfices and actualizes a good-enough world, since an optimal one is unactualizable.²³ On this scenario, God does not aim at maximizing salvific goodness because he fails to actualize a salvifically better world than the one he actualized, even though actualizing the better world was an available option. There's evidence that Molina would agree in rejecting (a), for as MacGregor explains, Molina thought that "choosing a world obtaining worse than the optimal salvific balance and so containing gratuitous damnation would be sin, a violation of God's good and loving nature."²⁴ The relationship between the two theses emerges: The Maximality Thesis entails the Possibility Thesis, and so if the Possibility Thesis is false, then the Maximality Thesis is likewise false, and Molinists will be forced to reject a thesis that appears central to their position. This is a steep price to pay.

These two consequences are bad news for Molinists if the Possibility Thesis is false, and thus they should not only defend the thesis from objections but, if possible, offer other arguments to support it. My interest is not to establish the coherence of salvifically optimal worlds nor to determine how many such worlds are possible.²⁵ My primary purpose is to show what does and does not follow for Optimistic Molinism on the assumption that at least one salvifically optimal world was available for God to actualize, and in the next section I argue that Optimistic Molinism implies that God necessarily actualizes a salvifically optimal world.

3. The Rationality Thesis

As Thomas Flint puts it, God is "the epitome of rationality for the Christian" and thus as a rational being, God acts for reasons.²⁶ For any decision that God faces, he knows all of the reasons for and against that particular course of action and he weighs those reasons perfectly; so God will do that for which he has all-things-considered best reasons for doing. This is not to

23. That is, God chooses an option that is good-enough although a better option is available. I later address a worry raised by a referee to this line of reasoning.

24. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 149n61.

25. I'm not aware of any Molinists who think that only a single salvifically optimal world is possible.

26. Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 30.

suggest that God undergoes discursive reasoning or deliberates in the same way humans do—it might be that God immediately and intuitively sees what he should do in any situation. On the traditional model of divine deliberation (which Molinism is based on), God surveys all possible worlds and chooses one that best fulfills his goals and purposes in creation.²⁷ For Molina, God's decision to create is “the result of a complete and unlimited deliberation by means of which God considers and weighs every possible circumstance and its ramifications and decides to settle on the particular world He desires.”²⁸ Thus, Molina recognized both that God engages in deliberation and that God acts for reasons.

Philosophers differentiate between kinds of reasons, two of which are pertinent to my argument here. First, there are normative reasons, which are reasons that make a particular course of action right, correct, or appropriate (either rationally or morally) for that agent.²⁹ Since actualizing a salvifically optimal world is a good thing given the amount of salvific goodness that will result from its creation, God has a normative reason for actualizing that world. Second, there are motivating reasons, which are the agent's own reasons that motivate her to act and count in favor of her so acting.³⁰ There is a close connection between motivating reasons and motives: God having a motive is him having a desire that he wants to satisfy, and given this desire, God will see certain facts as reasons for him to act.³¹ Since God desires to maximize salvific goodness and since he sees that a salvifically optimal world is available for actualization, God has a motivating reason to actualize that world.

For humans, normative and motivating reasons often come apart because we can be ignorant of some normative reasons, or we can improperly weigh the normative reasons that we do have, or we experience a weakness-of-will and fail to act how we should act. But none of these things apply to God: he is aware of all the relevant normative reasons for some action (because he is omniscient); he properly weighs the normative reasons for and against the action (because he is perfectly good); he is not weak-willed to perform (or refrain from performing) an action that, all things considered, he should do (or refrain from doing).³²

27. For a good discussion on three models of God's creative activity, see Paul Gould, “Theistic Activism and the Doctrine of Creation,” *Philosophia Christi* 16 (2014): 283–96. For criticism of the deliberative model, see Hugh J. McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

28. Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 239. See also MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 148.

29. Maria Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in the Philosophy of Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9, 26.

30. *Ibid.*, 35.

31. *Ibid.*, 62.

32. Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013), 109. See also Evan Fales, “Divine Freedom and the Choice of a World,” *International Journal for*

3.1. *The Overriding Reason Principle*

Based on these considerations, I propose that if B is the best action available in some particular situation, that fact provides God a reason for performing B, and in the absence of outweighing reasons for not performing B, a perfectly rational God would perform B; I'll call this sort of reason an overriding reason and incorporate the idea into the following principle:

Overriding Reason Principle: If (i) God has both normative and motivating reasons for doing B, and (ii) B is within God's power to bring about, and if (iii) God has no outweighing reasons not to do B, then God has an overriding reason to do B, and therefore God ought to do B.³³

A referee has raised the objection that since we aren't in the epistemic position to know all God's reasons, there could be competing goods beyond our ken that provide countervailing reasons against maximizing salvific goodness.³⁴ If this is the case, then Molinists can't claim that actualizing a salvifically optimal world is God's all-things-considered best reason precisely because we don't know that God lacks any relevant countervailing reasons, and so the third condition in the antecedent of the Overriding Reason Principle is false.

Of course, it's true that we are not in the suitable epistemic situation to know all God's reasons. I concede that this is the case, but I think this concession is harmless. Suppose there are goods beyond our ken that justify (morally and rationally) God in actualizing a less than salvifically optimal world—a salvifically good enough world. But then possibly, there are goods beyond our ken that also justify God in actualizing a world worse than a good enough world—a salvifically minimal world, that is, a world where a limited few are saved. So if appealing to the mere possibility of certain goods beyond our ken is enough to undermine the Molinist assumption that God's perfect goodness leads him to choose a salvifically optimal world, then appealing to the mere possibility of goods beyond our ken likewise undermines the assumption that God's perfect goodness leads him to actualize at least a salvifically good enough world. For all anyone knows, some such goods permit God to

Philosophy of Religion 35 (1994): 83.

33. The *ought* here is a rational ought; God is obligated to satisfy the rules/norms of rationality.

34. This objection is based on Chris Tucker's thesis that it's rationally appropriate to submaximize with motivation: "one aims at as much of the good as one can get but then chooses a suboptimal option because one has a countervailing consideration" (Tucker, "Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization (in the Philosophy of Religion)," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93 (2016): 127–43). There is an important caveat here: even if motivated submaximization is permissible (morally and rationally) for human agents, it may not be permissible for an essentially unsurpassable being, i.e., God. Klaas Kraay has raised a somewhat similar worry in his "Can God Satisfice?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2013): 399–410.

actualize a salvifically minimal world. But this conclusion—at least *prima facie*—conflicts with perfect being theism and so our reasoning has gone astray somewhere. At this point, the objector might appeal to God's nature in order to rule out salvifically minimal worlds, but then the Molinist could make the same appeal: an essentially unsurpassable being would actualize a salvifically optimal world if one were available (and on the assumption that actualizing such a world was the best option in that situation).³⁵ As Leibniz famously maintained, “to do less good than one could is to be lacking in wisdom or in goodness” and so God “cannot fail to act in the most perfect way, and consequently to choose the best.”³⁶

Furthermore, Molinists believe that there is ample biblical support for their affirmation that God desires to save all people and therefore desires to maximize salvific goodness. From this they infer that, even though the true CCFs won't allow for universal salvation, God desires to save as many as possible while achieving an optimal balance between the saved and damned. Although God's ideal desire (salvation of all) can't be realized, God's desire one removed from the ideal (salvation of as many as possible) can be realized and so God aims at this end.

However, and more importantly, I want to emphasize that the overall argument of this paper does not rest on the assumption that the Maximality Thesis or the Possibility Thesis is true: rather, my argument grants these Molinistic assumptions and merely shows the “extra baggage” Molinists must accept on the condition that the Rationality Thesis is true. So even if God could choose a suboptimal option, this might be an objection to Molinism *simpliciter* (as would, for example, an objection to the coherency of CCFs), but since I am not defending Molinism in this paper, a proper response to this objection will have to wait another day.

By accepting the Maximality Thesis, the Possibility Thesis, and God's perfect rationality, I think Molinists are committed to the claim that the Overriding Reason Principle is true and therefore God has an overriding reason to actualize a salvifically optimal world; therefore, God ought to actualize a salvifically optimal world.³⁷

35. The idea that God does what is best, if the best is available, is supported by many theist and nontheist philosophers alike: Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 146, 219; Alexander R. Pruss, “Divine Creative Freedom,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 7, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1; William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 179; McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, 170; Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 172; Fales, “Divine Freedom and the Choice of a World,” 83. J. Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 468; William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 166.

36. Quoted in Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 17.

37. MacGregor, in personal correspondence, says he is hesitant to call it an overriding reason and prefers the more “modest” claim “overriding desire,” based on the testimony of scripture. But

3.2. *The Enkratic Principle*

Oftentimes, although we know what we ought to do, for one reason or another, we fail to do it; we experience *akrasia*, or weakness-of-will. John Broome has argued that rationality requires of us that we intend to do what we believe we ought to do, and that this principle—which he calls *Enkrasia*—forms one of the main bridges between theoretical and practical rationality.³⁸ Rationality is not merely about deliberating about what course of action to take; when deliberation reaches a conclusion and you form a belief about what you should do, this belief engages your practical rationality.³⁹

Enkrasia is the principle that rationality requires you not to be *akratic*.⁴⁰ In other words, *Enkrasia* is not about doing what you believe you ought to do, but about intending to do what you ought to do. Whether or not *Enkrasia* is a necessary requirement for human rationality is debated⁴¹ but I think *Enkrasia* is required of divine rationality because necessarily, God cannot be *akratic*.

Necessarily, given his omnipotence and sovereignty over all creation, God's intentions cannot be frustrated (although his desires can). This is true with respect to God's intentions to actualize a world. Brian Leftow correctly observes: "For Molinism, given that God is rational enough to be guided by His knowledge of CFs [CCFs], any world that God attempts to actualize He succeeds in actualizing. . . . [W]hat He chooses (appropriately guided by this knowledge), He gets."⁴² So God cannot be *akratic* with respect to intending to do what he believes he ought to do. I use Broome's simplified formulation of *Enkrasia* and modify it to God's intention with respect to his creative decree:⁴³

Enkratic Principle: Rationality requires of God that, if (i) God believes at *t* that he ought to create the salvifically optimal world, and (ii) God believes at *t* that, if God himself were then to intend to create the salvifically optimal world, because of that, God would create the salvifically optimal world, and (iii) God believes at *t* that, if God himself were not then to intend to create the salvifically optimal world, because of that, God would not create the salvifically optimal

given what I've said above about normative and motivating reasons, I don't see why an overriding desire would not provide God certain facts as *reasons* for him to act.

38. John Broome, "Enkrasia," *Organon F* 20 (2013): 425. Broome clarifies that he understands the *ought* to be the "all-things-considered ought" (431). I think the rational sense of ought that I use in my argument is consistent with Broome's argument for *Enkrasia*.

39. *Ibid.*, 426.

40. *Ibid.*, 436. Broome understands *akrasia* not as failing to do what believe you ought to do, but failing to *intend* to do as you believe you ought to do.

41. E.g., see Andrew Reisner, "Is the *Enkratic* Principle a Requirement of Rationality?," *Organon F* 20 (2013): 437–63.

42. Leftow, "No Best World: Creaturely Freedom," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 283.

43. Broome, "Rationality," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, ed. Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 129.

world, then, (iv) God intends at t to create the salvifically optimal world.⁴⁴

Now I can formulate the last major thesis of my paper, which I'll call the Rationality Thesis: God is perfectly rational and always fulfills his rational obligations, including the Overriding Reason Principle and the Enkratic Principle.

Molinists who think that God desires to maximize salvific goodness and that a salvifically optimal world was a live option for actualization, in conjunction with the Overriding Reason Principle, should conclude that God ought to actualize a salvifically optimal world.⁴⁵ This conclusion, in conjunction with the Enkratic Principle guarantees that God intends to actualize a salvifically optimal world. Since God's intentions cannot be thwarted, God necessarily actualizes a salvifically optimal world.

The necessity here is weaker than metaphysical necessity, for God actualizing a world containing sin or humans is a contingent matter, and so he could have actualized a different world. But, on the condition that God decided to actualize a world where humans possess libertarian free will and become in need of salvation, and on the condition that both the Maximality Thesis and the Possibility Thesis are true, in conjunction with the Rationality Thesis, it follows that God actualizes a salvifically optimal world out of necessity.

Molinists might be uncomfortable with this conclusion and critics might see the green light to offer a *reductio* against Optimistic Molinism by showing that undesirable, questionable, or absurd consequences follow from the claim that God actualizes the salvifically optimal world (or one of many salvifically optimal worlds) necessarily. I hope to alleviate the discomfort of Molinists and show the critic that her objections fail in the next section.

4. Objections to Optimistic Molinism

Objection 1: If there is an infinite number of salvifically optimal worlds, then God's choice is arbitrary and trivial.

True, salvific goodness in these worlds is equal, but it is important to recognize that salvific goodness constitutes only a part of the overall value of a world; other kinds of goods make up the rest. If there is more than one intrinsic good and some of some of these goods are incommensurable, then

44. Clauses (ii) and (iii) are meant to ensure that it is within the agent's power and "up to that agent" whether or not the agent performs some action. See Broome, "Enkrasia," 433–4, for his explanation of these requirements.

45. Molinists might argue that the ought here is moral and that God's perfect goodness ensures that God creates that a salvifically optimal world. MacGregor acknowledges that this is what Molina believed (see *Luis de Molina*, 149n61), and in personal correspondence MacGregor affirms that God actualizes a salvifically optimal world out of *moral* necessity.

it is possible that two worlds could be vastly different even if salvific goodness is equal, and this will not make God's choice trivial. MacGregor correctly notes that "there may well be other factors that God takes into account when choosing a world, factors about which we may know nothing. To say that salvific optimality is a necessary factor does not imply that there are not other contingent factors based sheerly on God's will."⁴⁶

But if God discerns that there is a set of salvifically optimal worlds and that he has an overriding reason to choose one of them, in so choosing, God is acting rationally, for he is choosing an option for which he has most reasons to choose. What would be irrational is for God to choose a world outside this set (assuming the Maximality Thesis and the Possibility Thesis are true), for then he would be acting contrary to the demands of perfect rationality. Molinists might even argue that if God did choose arbitrarily, such a choice would not be irrational. Perhaps the most rational thing to do in a situation where one faces equal options is to choose randomly on pain of irrationality.⁴⁷

*Objection 2: If God actualizes a salvifically optimal world out of necessity, then salvation is not by grace and God shouldn't be praised for saving people.*⁴⁸

The Molinist can maintain that salvation is still by grace because God did not have to create humans or a world containing sin in which he offers salvation. Molina believed that for each possible person, there is a salvifically optimal world in which that person is saved, a salvifically optimal world in which that person is lost, and a salvifically optimal world in which that person does not exist.⁴⁹ For this reason the gracious nature of salvation is preserved; the redeemed can and should praise God, for they exist and are saved contingently.

Indeed, Molina categorically denied that salvation is in any way dependent on people; instead, it is gratuitous and solely based on God's will.⁵⁰ Grace is unmerited divine favor, and the essence of grace is maintained even if God necessarily creates a salvifically optimal world, for God's prior decision to actualize anything at all, let alone rational and moral beings, is contingent. Nothing and nobody forced God to actualize a world containing free beings,

46. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 145–6n53.

47. For an argument of this kind, see Lloyd Strickland, "God's Problem of Multiple Choice," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 141–57.

48. Some might object that if God performs some action out of necessity, then God is not free to refrain from performing it and thus his freedom is undermined. But this objection assumes that alternative possibilities (AP) are necessary for free will, and the Molinist could reasonably reject this assumption with respect to divine freedom. See Timpe, "God's Freedom, God's Character," in *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, ed. Daniel Speak and Kevin Timpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 15; Katherin Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189; Edward Wierenga, "The Freedom of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 434.

49. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 148.

50. Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 204.

sin, and salvation, but since he did decide to actualize such a world, God desired to maximize salvific goodness and did so by actualizing a salvifically optimal world. This is consistent with the concept of grace and God's praise-worthiness.⁵¹

Objection 3: If there are salvifically optimal worlds in which a person is freely saved, freely lost, or does not exist, then a loving God would not choose the world in which the person is lost.

Suppose that due to the true CCFs, God cannot save both Joe and Jane. The problem here is not that God cannot save both; the problem is that God could simply refrain from creating Jane if she freely chooses to reject him without subtracting salvific value from that world.⁵² According to Optimistic Molinism, there is a salvifically optimal world in which Jane does not exist, and so if God actualizes a salvifically optimal world knowing that Jane will be damned in that world (and God could have refrained from creating her), this counts as a serious defect in Optimistic Molinism. Optimistic Molinists acknowledge that God wants hell to be as empty as possible, but they also believe that the Bible teaches that some humans are damned; and yet, God is perfectly good, loving, and just. Indeed, this is an uneasy position to be in, but a few things could be said. First, as I previously mentioned, salvific goodness constitutes only a part of the overall value of each possible world. So even if two worlds are salvifically optimal, they could differ in respect to their sum value, and the difference in value could be in part attributable to the actions of human beings or other incommensurable goods. Suppose Jane is lost in salvifically optimal world A and does not exist in salvifically optimal world B. World A could contain less human suffering than B because while Jane does not exist in B, in A, she (although an atheist) dedicates her life to fight hunger in her city, thereby alleviating some suffering. If this situation is even possible then, *ceteris paribus*, there's a reason for God to prefer A to B even though both are salvifically optimal and Jane freely rejects salvation in A. But is God justified in creating Jane (who is eventually freely lost) in A even though her existence eliminates some evils?⁵³ I admit this is hard to swallow, but my only point was that possibly, there are some scenarios in which other, nonsalvific and incommensurable goods enter into God's deliberation about which world to actualize which justify God in creating Jane.

51. For an argument to a similar conclusion, see Justin J. Daeley, "The Necessity of the Best Possible World, Divine Thankworthiness, and Grace," *Sophia* (2018): 1–13.

52. Thanks to the referees for pressing me to address this objection.

53. A worry might be that God would not bring about good states of affairs by means of evil states of affairs. For an argument that God could permit evils for the sake of some greater-goods without intending the evils (even as a means to good ends), see the recent article by Justin Mooney, "Divine Intentions and the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 55 (2019): 215–34. Moreover, perhaps one's view of the nature and duration of hell (e.g., annihilationism as opposed to eternal conscious torment) plays a role here by influencing intuitions about what God is justified in doing with respect to people's eternal destinies.

Second, as MacGregor puts it, God is not guilty of “foisting a divine sting operation on the reprobate” or set them up for damnation, since no feasible world is salvifically unfair: Jane’s circumstances were freedom-preserving, and thus in those same circumstances, Jane could have responded positively to the grace offered by God and be saved.⁵⁴ Still, there is no denying that ultimately, “God simply, in his absolute sovereignty, selects the world he wants.”⁵⁵ Optimistic Molinists might concede that this objection raises a serious worry but think that while their position fares no better than other competing accounts, it fares no worse, because the soteriological problem of evil is a problem for anyone who affirms that at least one person will be lost.⁵⁶

Objection 4: Even if God is justified in actualizing a world in which many are saved but few are lost, it is implausible to think that God is justified in actualizing a world in which most (or even many) are lost, even if many are saved.

In his book *The Evangelical Universalist*, George MacDonald has challenged Craig on this point. As we have seen, Craig thinks it possible that God could prefer a world in which some are damned to a world in which all (but few in number) are saved. According to Craig, “The happiness of the saved should not be precluded by the admittedly tragic circumstance that their salvation has as its concomitant the damnation of many others, for the fate of the damned is the result of their own free choice.”⁵⁷ But given that Craig admits that “the vast majority of persons in the world are condemned and will be forever lost,”⁵⁸ how plausible is it to think that God would prefer a world in which many are saved but an even greater multitude is lost to a world in which few are saved and none are lost? MacDonald finds it “staggering” to think this.⁵⁹

The Optimistic Molinist might agree that this is implausible. Nevertheless, the critic would have to show that this divine preference necessarily could not obtain or is incompatible with Christian belief; but as long as such a preference is even possible, this critique does not demonstrate the falsity of Optimistic Molinism. At a deeper level, perhaps there is a clash of intuitions here about which preferences a perfect being would possess. Once again, it’s possible that God has other reasons and goals (hidden from us) which lead him to prefer this kind of world.⁶⁰ MacDonald then asks the following ques-

54. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 151.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Since Molinists generally reject universalism (perhaps primarily on biblical grounds), I won’t say anything in defense of this rejection but will point the reader to an interesting argument that Molinism is incompatible with non-universalism: MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 178–84.

57. Craig, “No Other Name,” 185. Craig is not the only Molinist who believes this; see MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 258, and Peels, “Divine Foreknowledge and Eternal Damnation,” 171.

58. *Ibid.*, 176.

59. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 181.

60. This reply is consistent with my reply to an earlier objection because God actualizing a salvifically optimal world in which Jane is lost or in which many are lost is consistent with God

tion: “Is there a possible world in which some people freely choose to reject God forever?”⁶¹ He argues that there is no possible world in which a fully informed person would freely choose to reject God forever, and so Craig’s argument fails.

But I think this conclusion is not obvious, for there are reasons to think that even fully rational, fully informed people could continue to reject salvation (even postmortem). Kevin Timpe has argued it’s possible that some people, due to their corrupt character that they freely formed, find some actions—like repentance—psychologically impossible to choose.⁶² For all anyone knows, people could harden their hearts to such a degree that rules out certain actions from being entertained because they see no reason to desire and thus perform that action.⁶³

5. Conclusion

Molinists accept the Maximality Thesis, the idea that a perfectly good God desires to maximize salvific goodness. They also accept the Possibility Thesis, which states that possibly, a salvifically optimal world was available for God to actualize. Molinists think that these two theses enhance Molinism’s explanatory scope and power, making their system attractive and superior to other theological systems in explicating certain theological doctrines. I argued that if the two theses are coherent, in conjunction with the Rationality Thesis, Molinists are committed to the claim that God actualizes a salvifically optimal world out of necessity. I examined four objections that attempted to show that worrisome consequences for Molinism follow from this commitment and found them wanting. I conclude that Optimistic Molinism is defensible—at least for the time being—and that Molinists should be optimistic that the actual world is salvifically optimal.⁶⁴

doing the best for *all-things-considered* reasons. My appeal to our epistemic limitation in this reply underlines our uncertainty in knowing *which* option is actually best, not our uncertainty about what God would do if a best option *was* available.

61. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 182.

62. Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, chap. 5. Timpe also responds to Thomas Talbott, whom MacDonald relies on to make his argument. For more on “unthinkable actions,” see Justin A. Capes, “Action, Responsibility and the Ability to Do Otherwise,” *Philosophical Studies* 158 (2012):1–15.

63. Also, if annihilationism is true, then we need not worry about people rejecting God forever.

64. I’m grateful to Kirk MacGregor, Greg Welty, and two referees for their probing comments on earlier versions of this paper and for the feedback I received at the 2019 EPS/ETS Southwest meeting where this paper was first presented.