Best Feasible Worlds: Divine Freedom and Leibniz's Lapse

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By far one of the most stimulating challenges to classical theism in recent years has been William L. Rowe's argument against divine freedom. The argument receives its most sustained defense in Rowe (2004) and it has garnered attention from several philosophers interested in defending classical theism against Rowe's critique. One theistic reply that has emerged in the recent literature appeals to modified accounts of libertarian freedom which have the result that God may be free even if he necessarily actualizes the best possible world. Though in many ways attractive, this approach appears to lead to the damning consequence of modal collapse, i.e., that the actual world is the only possible world. But appearances can be deceiving, and in this paper I argue that, on close inspection, the threat of modal collapse dissolves—a fact which only becomes clear when more attention is given to Leibniz's Lapse in the divine freedom debate. I begin by briefly reviewing Rowe's argument in Section 1. In sections 2 and 3 I introduce the modified libertarianism strategy and the argument that it leads to modal collapse. Then, in section 4, l demonstrate that the modal collapse objection fails by considering Plantinga's critique of the Leibnizian notion that God can actualize any possible world, and drawing out the implications of this point for the modified libertarianism strategy on first Molinist, and then non-Molinist, assumptions.

1 Rowe's Argument

In a nutshell, Rowe contends that God, as the greatest possible being, must actualize (or, in Rowe's language, 'create') the best possible world if there is one. Rowe insists that because God, in actualizing the world, does not act freely but rather of necessity, it does not make sense to praise or thank him for the world he has actualized—a result that is not very comfortable for many theists. Rowe's complete case is multifaceted and carefully argued, and so, while we cannot explore it exhaustively, we must pause for a closer look. For our purposes it will be useful to begin with the cornerstone of Rowe's argument by inquiring about what sort of freedom God might enjoy on the supposition that there is a best possible world. According to Rowe (2004), "…given that God exists and that there is a best creatable world, God's nature as an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being would require him to create the best world" (p. 151). But, Rowe insists, if God *necessarily* actualizes the best world, then he does not do so *freely*. Consider, then, the following set of propositions:

(1) Necessarily, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect,
(2) Necessarily, there is a best possible world, and
(3) God freely actualizes a world.

Though Rowe doesn't lay things out in quite this way, if he is right, then (1)-(3) form an inconsistent triad; affirming any two of them will entail the negation of the third. That is because the following principles appear to be implicit in Rowe's argument (Perhaps J. L. Mackie would have called them 'quasi-logical rules.'):

(4) Necessarily, if God is omniscient and there is a best possible world α, then God knows about α.
(5) Necessarily, if God is omnipotent and there is a best possible world α, then God can actualize α.

(6) Necessarily, if God is morally perfect and there is a best possible world α, then God wants to actualize α.

But if (4)-(6) are true, then if we affirm (1) and (2), it seems to follow that

(7) Necessarily, God actualizes α.

But given Rowe's commitment to a libertarian analysis of free will (a commitment shared by many contemporary theist philosophers), (7) appears to be inconsistent with (3).

There are a number of routes a theist might pursue in response to Rowe's challenge. For example, inspired by Robert Adams' valiant attempt to do the same, the theist might question (6) (Adams 1972).[1] Alternatively, the theist could deny (2). Since (2) is not a traditional theistic thesis, this move may strike the theist as a particularly attractive option. One could suppose, in place of (2), that there is a set of equal-best worlds, or that possible worlds (or at least some set of best possible worlds) are value-incommensurate. Or one could argue that there are no best possible worlds; for any world that God could actualize, there is a better world he could have actualized instead. But Rowe incorporates this latter option into his overall strategy. He argues that if there is no best world, then God is not perfectly good, since, for any world he might actualize, there will be a better world he could have actualized instead.[2] If this objection succeeds (and that is a matter of considerable controversy) then the theist is restricted to best world scenarios. Rowe ultimately concludes, albeit tentatively, that "…God cannot enjoy much in the way of libertarian freedom with respect to creation" (2004, p. 7). Hereafter, I shall refer to the argument of Rowe's book as *Rowe's Argument*, or simply *RA*.

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[1] See also Rowe's critique of Adams in Rowe 2004 pp. 74-87.

[2] Rowe points out that this no-best-world thesis has a long history in philosophical theology, and he devotes a chapter to Aquinas' defense of this claim. Among contemporary philosophers we see the no-best-world thesis as far back as Plantinga (1974a).

I believe there are several strategies for countering *RA* that show enough promise to merit continued attention. For present purposes, however, we are interested primarily in a strategy which grants both that there is a best possible world and that God's moral perfection entails that he would want to actualize such a world if he could—a strategy that denies that (7) is incompatible with (3), and argues therefore that the theist can affirm (1) and (2) even if they entail (7). For some of the earliest hints of this possible escape route, we turn to a suggestion by Edward R. Wierenga.

2   The Modified Libertarianism Strategy

Granting, then, that there is a best possible world α and that, necessarily, if there is such a world God wants to actualize it, how might one attempt to understand God's creative act as a free act? In recent years, modified accounts of libertarian free will have begun to emerge in the literature,[3] and similar ideas have found their way into the divine freedom conversation, resulting in a strategy for replying to *RA* that I will dub the *Modified Libertarinism Strategy*, or *MLS*. *MLS*, in short, is the attempt to answer *RA* by employing modified accounts of libertarianism to argue that God both freely *and* necessarily actualizes the best world. This strategy is nascent in Edward R. Wierenga's paper "The Freedom of God," (2002) where he draws what he takes to be an important lesson from compatibilist accounts of free will. Noting that "canny" compatibilists hold that an action can be both free and causally determined so long as it is determined by the right causal antecedents (the agent's beliefs and desires) in the right manner (e.g. not by drugs or hypnosis), Wierenga suggests that the compatibilist's central insight is that free actions can be causally determined if the causes are such that they "… are the agent's *own*, that they are internal to the agent" (p. 436). Wierenga continues:

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[3] For example, consider Stump (1999) and Stump (2001).

> Those who reject the compatibilist account are often persuaded by arguments, like those of Peter van Inwagen, that purport to show that, if determinism is true, an agent's beliefs and desires themselves have antecedent causes stretching back to before the agent even existed. The relevant causal conditions are thus not really internal to the agent. The insight, to repeat, of the compatibilist is that the right antecedent conditions, internal to the agent, are compatible with the agent acting freely; on this interpretation, the compatibilist's mistake is in taking the proffered conditions to be internal in this way. (p. 436)

But (as Wierenga is quick to note), in the case of God there are no antecedent causes of God's beliefs, character, etc. external to his own nature. Consequently, if the compatibilist insight that Wierenga has singled out for attention is correct, then even while rejecting a compatibilist analysis of human freedom, we may hold both that God's own beliefs, desires, and character causally determine his actualizing α, *and* that he actualizes α *freely*.

The core idea behind *MLS*, that God may be free on a libertarian analysis of freedom even though his nature (more specifically, his character, beliefs, and—if he has any—desires) causally constrains him to actualize a particular world, has continued to make appearances in the literature.[4] But a particularly important discussion appears in Kevin Timpe's (2013) book *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, where Timpe uses virtue libertarianism to flesh out *MLS*. Virtue libertarianism is a species of source incompatibilism—the idea that free will, at its core, amounts to ultimate sourcehood (while the (in)famous Principle of Alternative Possibilities takes a secondary or derivative role). In brief, virtue libertarianism holds that an agent's character affects what reasons she discerns for choosing one way or another, and how much weight such reasons have for her. This proposal is built on a reasons-responsive account of freedom wherein an agent's options are constrained in certain ways by her reasons for acting. In

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[4] The idea appears in Morriston (2006), Rowe (2007), Senor (2008) and Wierenga (2007).

order to choose a certain course of action, an agent must see a reason for doing so, which means that there must be some good which she perceives in taking that course of action. Timpe argues that virtue libertarianism, when applied to the issue of divine freedom, resolves the apparent conflict between God's freedom and his moral perfection. For not only does nothing outside of God force him to choose a certain way, God is constrained only by his reasons for acting, which are molded by his perfect character. Although he may be constrained to the point of necessarily actualizing the best world, he is not constrained in a way that is incompatible with freedom, properly understood.

The details of Timpe's account, though both important and interesting, need not detain us. For our purposes, we are concerned primarily with the thesis that, on a proper understanding of libertarian freedom (whatever precise form that understanding ultimately takes), propositions (7) and (3) above are consistent, and therefore (1)-(3) have not been shown to be inconsistent after all. Also important is the point that, on *MLS* as it has been described, God's necessary act can be a free act in part because, although he does not bring about the conditions which are logically sufficient for the act (e.g. his beliefs and character), those beliefs and that character are not causally determined by anything external to God's own nature either. But this desideratum cannot be met by creatures, since the character, beliefs and desires of a creature will always have causal antecedents that are external to her unless they have been brought about by an undetermined action of the creature herself. Consequently, one who embraces *MLS* as described above can still hold that alternative possibilities are important (either directly or indirectly) for creatures to be the ultimate authors of their actions.

While arguing for the compatibility of (7) and (3) is the key move in *MLS*, *MLS* must claim more, if it is a viable way out for the theist. In addition to claiming that (1)-(3) are consistent (given modified libertarianism), *MLS* also claims (at least implicitly) that the theist can affirm (1)-(3) without facing any other obviously fatal difficulties either. The importance of this point will soon be apparent.

3. *MLS* and Modal Collapse

A serious concern that threatens the theist who uses *MLS* is the charge that it leads to a most unwelcome metaphysical situation: modal collapse—the idea that the actual world is the only possible world. The line of thinking undergirding this objection is discernable in Rowe (though he doesn't draw this conclusion himself), where he makes use of Thomas V. Morris's idea of God as a delimiter of possibilities. Morris's point is that God, as a necessary being with certain essential perfections, renders impossible certain apparent possibilities (like very bad worlds) (Morris 1987). Having previously argued that an unending series of increasingly better possible worlds is problematic for theism, Rowe (2004) applies Morris's idea to his own conclusions about divine freedom as follows:

> [F]ollowing the path that Morris has pointed out, we conclude that God's necessary existence and necessary perfections would rule out two seeming possibilities: (1) there being possible worlds that are bad; (2) there being an unending series of increasingly better worlds. In fact, if God exists, his necessary existence and perfection would require either a best possible world or a number of worlds equally good and none better. In the former case, God would of necessity create the best possible world. (p. 166)

But on the assumption that, if there is one best possible world, God would "of necessity" actualize that world, then clearly, by a final extension of the delimiter of possibilities notion, modal collapse results. For if God must actualize α of necessity, then all other apparently possible worlds are not really possible after all.

Many philosophers are not at all comfortable with the suggestion that the actual world is the only possible world. After all, that nothing could have been different than it actually is seems an incredible claim. But precisely this notion seems to afflict *MLS*, since *MLS* grants both that there

is a best possible world and that, necessarily, if there is such a world, God wants to actualize it. Consequently, it appears that *MLS* fails to solve the problem posed by *RA* (or solves it at too great a cost). I shall call this the Modal Collapse Objection.

So have we really reached the end of the line? Does the use of *MLS* doom us to modal collapse? I don't think so. There is a way out of this problem that may not be immediately apparent because it depends on a distinction which has been largely glossed over in the debate spawned by *RA*. With at least one exception, which we shall consider below, it seems that Rowe and his interlocutors have not given much attention in the course of this dialogue to what they likely (and reasonably) judged to be a relatively unimportant complicating factor in the discussion up to this point: namely, Leibniz's Lapse and its consequences, such as the distinction between possible and feasible worlds. I submit that this factor is no longer unimportant. We need to make a refinement in the way the issues and options are presented, and when we do, we will find that *MLS* need not lead to modal collapse.

4   Modal Collapse and the Metaphysics of Libertarian Freedom

In *The Nature of Necessity*, Alvin Plantinga (1974b) attributes to Leibniz the claim that, since God is omnipotent, he can actualize just any possible world. Plantinga argues that this claim is false, dubbing it "Leibniz' Lapse."[5] Imagine that tomorrow I am offered a job for which I applied only reluctantly, and I must decide whether or not to accept the offer. The circumstances C are such that I am not causally determined to either accept or reject the offer. Consequently, there is a possible world W_1 where, in C, I freely accept the job, and there is a possible world W_2 where in C I freely turn it down. Now if God were to intervene and determine whether or not I accept the job, then I would not be choosing freely, and the resulting world

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[5] Here we are bracketing considerations of God's character that might incline him toward only best worlds.

would be neither W_1 nor W_2. But if, as a matter of contingent fact, I would freely choose to accept the job in C, then God cannot actualize the possible world W_2 in which I freely reject the job in C (and *vice versa*). Thus at least one of the worlds W_1 and W_2 is not actualizable by God, *even though both are possible worlds*. It is easy to see how this generalizes to larger sets of free choices by whole worlds of free creatures. While there are many possible worlds containing various combinations of free creaturely actions, which of these worlds are actualizable by God will depend on how creatures would choose in various situations. And so careful reflection on the metaphysics of libertarian freedom shows that God cannot actualize just any possible world.

The implications for discussions fueled by *RA* must not be missed. Earlier, when we derived (7) from (1) and (2), we did this by way of three principles that appear to be implicit in Rowe's argument: (4)-(6). But look again at (5):

(5) Necessarily, if God is omnipotent and there is a best possible world α, then God can actualize α.

Why should we think (5) is true? Given Plantinga's case against Leibniz, it is not at all obvious that from God's omnipotence one can infer God's ability to actualize the best possible world, for we have seen that there are some possible worlds that God can't actualize. And if we have no reason to think (5) is true, then we have not shown that there is a successful argument from (1) and (2) to (7). But the *MLS* advocate can do even better than this: she can argue cogently that (5) is false, and indeed that (7) is false. To see this, we need to take a closer look at the implications that Plantinga's critique of Leibniz has for the divine freedom debate, and what happens when that debate is reframed so as to explicitly accommodate the insight that God cannot actualize just any possible world.

4.1. Molinism

Plantinga originally made his case against Leibniz's Lapse in the context of (it was later realized) a Molinist model of divine providence. Therefore, as we take a closer look at the implications of Leibniz's Lapse for divine freedom and *MLS*, we will begin within that same context. On Molinism, God is thought to possess 'middle knowledge' of subjunctive conditionals of creaturely freedom. In keeping with the common parlance, we shall call these conditionals counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, or CCFs. CCFs take the form "If person *P* were in circumstances *C*, *P* would freely choose *X*," where *C* is a complete initial segment of a possible world which does not causally determine *P*'s choosing either *X* or ~*X*. In the Molinist literature of recent decades, the labels 'possible world' and 'feasible world' have typically been used to highlight Plantinga's basic insight with regard to Leibniz's Lapse. A feasible world is a possible world that is actualizable by God, given the truth-values of CCFs.

In his paper "Perfect Goodness and Divine Freedom," Wierenga (2007) notes in passing the Modal Collapse Objection (as I have called it). He points out that, given certain common theistic assumptions, if one grants that there is a best possible world, "…it is hard to see in what sense any other worlds are so much as possible" (p. 208). But in a footnote Wierenga hints that the distinction between feasible and merely possible worlds could be used to dodge this consequence:

> We will later distinguish possible worlds generally from *feasible* possible worlds, where the latter are ones that God is able to actualize. Whether there is a best possible feasible world and, if so, which world it is, is something that could vary from world to world. Thus, if it should turn out that, necessarily, God actualizes the best feasible world, it would not follow that only one world is possible. (p. 208)

This brief but insightful comment is in need of further development. With a little work, the idea here can be fleshed out and employed in defense of *MLS*.

I take it, first of all, that Wierenga is supposing that a best possible world, if there is one, would contain free creatures. After all, his point, in part, is that considerations of feasibility impact which world is the best world God can actualize. But if that is so, then it would seem that the best possible world α, if there is one, would have to be a candidate for infeasibility, and therefore a world containing free creatures that might not "cooperate" were God to try to actualize that world. But this raises an obvious question: would the best possible world, if there is one, contain free creatures? Although there is no way to demonstrate conclusively that it would, I think some will find this eminently plausible, and even more will find it at least moderately plausible. The wide appeal and influence of Plantinga's Free Will Defense, which is committed to the claim that free agents contribute significantly to the value of a world, supports the notion that the best possible world would contain such creatures. At the very least, this claim has enough prima facie plausibility to warrant a theist's taking that position if it helps her resolve tensions in her belief system like that highlighted by *RA*.[6] If we grant this premise, it follows that the best possible world α may not be feasible for God. Consequently, in both formulating and evaluating *RA* we need to follow Wierenga's lead and think in terms of God actualizing the best feasible world, rather than simply the best possible world.

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[6] Even if one were agnostic about whether the best possible world contains free creatures, the modal collapse objection turns out to be inconclusive, since the modal collapse objection must hold that the best possible world contains no free creatures. A brief defense of the value of a complex world including free agents appears in Hasker (2011). The value of a world of free creatures is also defended by Swinburne (2004), who holds that God's creating some humanly free agents and his not creating humanly free agents (not knowing if creatures will abuse their freedom) are equal-best acts. (Even on that assumption, a world in which creatures use their freedom for good would seem to be a candidate for a best possible world.)

This apparently minor emendation is crucial for the *MLS* advocate, because, as Wierenga rightly observes, the feasibility of worlds is a contingent matter: what is in fact the best feasible world might not have been the best feasible world. Thus, granting that α contains free creatures, it is not just that (5) is in need of support; it's clearly a non-sequitur, for there are possible worlds in which α is not feasible. And (7) doesn't merely *fail to follow* from (1) and (2); it's simply *false*. If it's possible that God exists but cannot actualize α, then it is not true that, *necessarily, God actualizes* α. Neither is it the case that if α is not feasible then there is some other (feasible) world β about which *God actualizes β* is necessarily true. Rather, which world is the best feasible world varies depending on which set of worlds happens to be feasible. Each set of feasible worlds that God might have found himself facing may be called (following Flint 1998) a *creaturely world-type*. Which world-type God faces is a function of which CCFs are true—a matter which is both wholly contingent and not within God's control. So God must actualize the best world that it is logically possible for him to actualize, but which world that is can vary depending on how we creatures would choose.

There is another point in Wierenga's footnote that will be of interest to the *MLS* advocate. Wierenga indicates not only that the best feasible world might vary from one world to the next, but also that whether or not there *is* a best feasible world could vary. We can develop this point by distinguishing between a best possible (feasible) world and a world than which none better is possible (feasible). It seems there is only one way to be a best possible world; namely, by being a world that is better than any other possible world. But there are several ways to be a world than which none better is possible. One is by being a best possible world. Another is by being one of a set of equal-best possible worlds. Yet another is by being one of a set of worlds that are either equal-best or value-incommensurate with each other. The same goes for feasible worlds. For convenience, I shall refer to a best possible (or feasible) world as a best world, and I shall refer to a world than which none greater is possible (feasible) as an unsurpassable world. It

is obvious that God, in terms of his moral character, could will to actualize any unsurpassable possible world, and likewise any unsurpassable feasible world. So if the true creaturely world-type presented God with a set of equal-best feasible worlds, God could actualize any one of those unsurpassable worlds. So it seems there is another (albeit not independent) way in which possibilities are opened up for the MLS advocate by feasibility issues. Not only are there plausibly other possible creaturely world-types which result in different best feasible worlds; some of those world-types will result in their being a set of equally unsurpassable worlds from which God can choose.

4.2   Non-Molinism[7]

But of course not everyone is a Molinist, and so it seems valuable to ask whether anything that has been said so far can be adapted for use by theists who favor other models of divine providence. To that end, let us now assume that Molinism is false. There are no true CCFs, or, if there are any, God at best knows some of them fallibly and inferentially, in virtue of knowing what people would *probably* do in various circumstances. The language of actualizing feasible worlds is at best less natural on this view, and I suspect that it can't be applied (except perhaps in the most strained sense) outside of Molinist contexts at all. For although one does not need infallible knowledge of how free creatures will choose in various situations in order to weakly actualize (at least some of) their choices, nevertheless, if Molinism is false, there may well be cases where God cannot make a very

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[7] Primarily I have in mind open theist and simple foreknowledge models of providence, on the (admittedly controversial) assumption that foreknowledge provides God little or no providential advantage. For models of divine providence that affirm libertarian freedom but do not fit in either these or the Molinist mold (such as Kvanvig's model using epistemic conditionals, or simple-foreknowledge models that try to accommodate stronger accounts of providence), a separate analysis would have to be provided. I do not have the space to do that here. For Kvanvig's model see Kvanvig (2011). For a simple-foreknowledge view with a stronger account of providence see Pruss (2007).

reliable prediction about how a person would choose in a given scenario, as well as cases where the less probable choice is made. Consequently, there is a sense in which God only actualizes portions (albeit very significant portions) of possible worlds. So I propose to drop feasible world language in this section. However, the possible/feasible world distinction is the Molinist manifestation of a more fundamental point in Plantinga's treatment of Leibniz's Lapse. That more fundamental point—that God cannot strongly actualize a creature's choosing freely in inderministic circumstances—also manifests itself outside of Molinist contexts. It is with that extra-Molinist manifestation that we are concerned in this section.

We shall again assume that worlds containing free, rational creatures are very valuable sorts of worlds—many of them (those without too much evil) being the best. Supposing that God would necessarily want to actualize α, he will begin by strongly actualizing an initial segment of α up to and including the arrival of the first set of free creatures in a certain initial set of circumstances. Call this initial segment of α S, and the possible worlds containing S the S-worlds. Furthermore, the initial creatures in S will be given a range of freedom R. We may suppose that R is restricted in such a way that there will always be a certain minimum balance of good and evil, so no world within S is too evil. This sort of restriction could be achieved in a variety of ways: perhaps God is simply poised to intervene (in either subtle or not so subtle ways) if things begin to go too far, or perhaps God has designed the created realm such that our ability to inflict harm on others is appropriately limited.

In this scenario, precisely which S-world is ultimately actualized (whether α or some other) will depend in large part on the choices that creatures in S make. For S will have a branching future where each possible free creaturely choice constitutes a branch (and thus represents a distinct possible world or set of worlds), and as we saw above, it is not up to God how free creatures will choose to act in any given indeterministic situation. As creatures make choices within the boundaries of R, God will execute various contingency plans by performing best (or unsurpassable) acts in

response to creaturely decisions as history progresses, always aiming for the best world he can. It is clear that modal collapse is not just evaded on this scenario, but is evaded fairly widely. The more creaturely choices that are permitted, the wider the realm of possibility will be. And it seems reasonable that α and other very good *S*-worlds might contain a large number of free choices.

But we have been assuming that God would target α, and even granting that God necessarily wills the best, this assumption may be too simplistic. In a scenario where God lacks middle knowledge, not only values but also probabilities will have to be weighed—and this actually serves our purposes. Possibilities can be opened even further than in the above scenario if the best possible world α is less probable than some second- or third-best (etc.) worlds that are not *S*-words, for in that case there may be several unsurpassable initial creative acts open to God, each of which is the actualizing of an initial state of affairs including its own set of creatures, circumstances, and branching future. There might, for example, be two worlds α and β such that α is the better of the two worlds, but β is the more probable of the two, and their initial segments are incompatible with each other. Depending on the exact value of the worlds and probabilities involved, if all other things are equal, it might be that actualizing the initial segment of α is an act no better or worse than actualizing the initial segment of β. It is easy to imagine that similar situations could obtain for God as he makes decisions at later stages in the temporal unfolding of the world as well. On the whole, then, it seems that even outside the context of Molinism, the *MLS* advocate can avoid modal collapse.

5   Conclusion

Though modal collapse seems initially to threaten theists who wish to employ *MLS*, we have seen that this objection to *MLS* ultimately fails. This is easiest to see in a Molinist context, where we have the machinery of

the possible/feasible world distinction at our disposal. But we have seen that the insight underlying the notion of feasible worlds—that it is not up to God how a creature freely chooses in a set of freedom-permitting circumstances—can also be employed to answer the Modal Collapse Objection on non-Molinist models of providence. One lesson that can be drawn from this discussion is that Leibniz's Lapse and related ideas (like the feasible/possible world distinction) have an important role to play in the divine freedom debate, and should not be glossed over in such discussion. But equally important is the point that, for theists, whether Molinists or non-Molinists, *MLS* remains a viable strategy for replying to *RA*. I am not sure if *MLS* is the right approach to a successful vindication and explication of divine freedom, but at least we can conclude that it remains firmly in the running.

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