

How God Knows Counterfactuals of Freedom

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1 Introduction

Molinists claim that there are true subjunctive conditionals about what any agent would freely do in any complete, indeterministic circumstances that agent could inhabit.¹ To take a standard example, one such conditional might claim that, if Peter were in (complete, indeterministic) circumstances *C*, he would freely deny Christ. Conditionals of this sort are usually (if somewhat inaccurately²) called ‘counterfactuals of freedom’.

Molinists also claim that God knows all true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating the world. So, even before creating anything, God knows infallibly that, if Peter were in circumstances *C*, he would deny Christ. For reasons that we need not go

¹ The requirement that the circumstances in the antecedent are complete is explained by Flint, *Divine Providence*, who advises Molinists to “think of the circumstances as including all of the prior causal activity of all agents along with all of the simultaneous causal activity by all agents other than the agent the counterfactual is about. Circumstances which are all-inclusive in this way will be said to be *complete* circumstances” (47).

² As other authors have observed (e.g. Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 26), some of these conditionals have true antecedents, and so are not technically counterfactual conditionals. But I will continue to call them ‘counterfactuals of freedom’, as this terminology has been standard for decades now.

into here, this remarkable cognitive resource which the Molinist attributes to God goes by the moniker 'middle knowledge'.

There are several standard objections to Molinism in the literature. For example, some critics of Molinism argue that counterfactuals of freedom cannot be true because there are no adequate ontological grounds for their truth.³ Some argue that, for semantic reasons, counterfactuals of freedom cannot be true explanatorily prior to creation.⁴ And some argue that certain Molinist commitments about counterfactuals of freedom threaten the free will of the subjects of those counterfactuals.⁵

But there are also critics of Molinism who think that, in addition to these well-trodden worries, Molinism faces a problem about the mechanism of God's middle knowledge. They contend that there simply is no means by which God could know (infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating) which counterfactuals of freedom are true. Versions of this objection have been pressed by Timothy O'Connor,⁶ Kathrin Rogers,⁷ Richard Swinburne,⁸ Hugh McCann,⁹ and Alan Gehring.¹⁰ And contemporary Molinists, for their part, have done little to rebut this charge. As Perszyk observes, the Molinist response usually goes something like this: "If [counterfactuals of freedom] are true and God is

³ See Adams, "Middle Knowledge", for an influential presentation of this objection.

⁴ This worry was first voiced in Adams, "Middle Knowledge."

⁵ This sort of objection stems originally from Hasker "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge."

⁶ O'Connor, "Impossibility."

⁷ Rogers, "Omniscience."

⁸ Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 256.

⁹ McCann, "The Free Will Defence." McCann takes his argument to be similar to O'Connor's ("Impossibility") and Zagzebski's (*The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, 148-9). Zagzebski structures her argument as a dilemma for the view that middle knowledge explains foreknowledge, rather than an argument against middle knowledge per se. McCann's argument is similar to one horn of the dilemma.

¹⁰ Gehring, *Truthmaker Theory*, 378-392. However, not all critics of Molinism press this issue. For example, by Hasker's lights, "...it is not clear that the friend of counterfactuals [of freedom] (or any other theist, for that matter) is required to explain how it is that God knows what he knows" (*God, Time, and Knowledge*, 29).

omniscient, he knows them. Don't ask how! He just does (innately or immediately)!"¹¹

My aim is to show that this worry is spurious; there is no problem about how God could know true counterfactuals of freedom that is independent of the more familiar objections to Molinism.¹² To show this, I will assume for the sake of argument that the more familiar objections fail, and moreover that the specific facets of Molinism which they attack are true. So, I will assume that there are true counterfactuals of freedom, that they are true explanatorily prior to creation, and that these and other standard Molinist claims are compatible with human freedom. And I will argue that, given these assumptions, we can develop a plausible 'mechanics of middle knowledge',¹³ i.e. a story about the mechanism by which God could know true counterfactuals of freedom (infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating).

¹¹ "Recent Work on Molinism", 761. In fairness, the early Molinists did try to explain the mechanism of middle knowledge. They proposed that God "supercomprehends" free agents. Whereas to comprehend an agent is to fully grasp its nature, to supercomprehend an agent is to have an even more perfect grasp of that agent which (somehow) affords God knowledge of what the agent would do in non-determining circumstances. As far as I know, this proposal has won no contemporary adherents, and it has been criticized even by prominent advocates of middle knowledge. Flint complains that supercomprehension is "a rather murky and unhelpful concept" (*Divine Providence*, 56n26), and Freddoso concedes that this "account of how God has middle knowledge is arguably the weakest link in the Molinist chain" ("Introduction", 52-53).

¹² Thanks to the editor for suggesting this way of framing the paper.

¹³ I introduced the term 'mechanics of middle knowledge' in Mooney, "Does Molinism Reconcile Freedom and Foreknowledge?". It is inspired by the term 'mechanics of foreknowledge', which is used heavily in recent work by Byerly (e.g. in "God Knows the Future" and *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge*), who cites Viney ("God Only Knows?") as its source. Byerly lists Molinism, theological determinism, Kvanvig's epistemic conditionals view (in *Destiny and Deliberation*, ch. 8), and his own time-ordering view as accounts of the mechanics of foreknowledge. I would add Zagzebski's hyperspace view (*The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, 172-9) and the acquaintance models in Alston ("Does God Have Beliefs?") and Dickinson ("God Knows").

2 A Mechanics of Middle Knowledge

If indeed some counterfactuals of freedom are true explanatorily prior to creation, then it turns out that a mechanics of middle knowledge can be derived from an independently motivated account of divine knowledge in general. To see this, let's begin with the general account of divine knowledge.

A few decades ago, William Alston proposed a direct acquaintance account of divine knowledge that, he contends, attributes the most exalted, perfect way of knowing to God.¹⁴ On Alston's view, for every fact *F*, God knows *F* by being directly acquainted with (aware of) *F*. The acquaintance relation in question is direct in the sense that it is unmediated. There is nothing 'between' God and the facts God is acquainted with - not even representational mental states, such as beliefs, that represent the facts of God's acquaintance. Instead, for God, facts themselves are "directly present to consciousness."¹⁵

An analogy may help.¹⁶ Consider an unembodied Cartesian ego introspecting on its own thought life. I take it that there is some kind of direct awareness or acquaintance relation holding between the ego and its own occurrent thoughts. This relation seems to be direct in the sense of being unmediated, and also knowledge-conferring, for it affords the ego knowledge of its own thoughts. Now, perhaps a subject can only stand in this particular relation to mental entities, or more narrowly still, to the contents of her own mind. But I take it that Alston is hypothesizing a different relation, one which is analogous to this one in that it is an

¹⁴ Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?" For other acquaintance models of divine knowledge, see Dickinson, "God Knows," and Knowles, "God's Mathematical Beliefs." I think the mechanics of middle knowledge I develop below could be constructed using Dickinson's and Knowles's views instead of Alston's, but I won't pursue that project here. For other accounts of how God knows every fact, see Mavrodes, "How Does God Know the Things He Knows?" and Brenner, "How Does God Know that 2+2=4?"

¹⁵ This phrase is H. H. Price's, as quoted by Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?", 294.

¹⁶ Thanks to Dan Dake for helping me to see the plausibility of proposals like Alston's, and for helpful discussion of the material in this section and the next, particularly the Cartesian ego analogy.

unmediated, knowledge-conferring acquaintance relation, but disanalogous in that a subject - or at least a divine subject - can stand in this relation to any fact whatsoever, including facts about both the physical and the mental, the concrete and the abstract.

Maybe we do not have a firm grasp on the intrinsic nature of this relation that Alston is proposing, or on what it would be like to stand in that relation to certain facts (or to any fact at all), but that should not be worrisome. For if - perhaps *per impossibile* - we never stood in the direct awareness relation that we in fact stand in to our own thoughts, we would have no firm grasp on the intrinsic nature of that relation, or what it would be like to stand in that relation. So, since we are not divine subjects, we should not be surprised to find ourselves similarly in the dark about God's epistemic access to the world.¹⁷

Suppose that Alston is right that God is directly acquainted with every fact. A natural next question is: what exactly *is* a fact? I propose that facts are the entities that Armstrong calls states of affairs.¹⁸ Thus, facts are instantiations of properties by objects. Combining the Alstonian account of divine knowledge with this Armstrongian position generates the view that God is directly acquainted with every case of some object instantiating some property. This means that we can give an account of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom if we can identify some instantiations of properties by objects such that God's being directly acquainted with those instantiations is sufficient for God to know true counterfactuals of freedom.

One way to do this is to look for facts which would ground true counterfactuals of freedom. For example, suppose it's true that, if subject S were in circumstances C, S would freely perform action A. According to Robert Adams, Suárez suggested a view which entails that this counterfactual of freedom is true in virtue of S's having the property of *being such that, if S were in C, S would freely do A*.¹⁹ A variant of this view

¹⁷ Gehring, *Truthmaker Theory*, 390-2, makes these points about knowing what it is like to know in the way that God knows.

¹⁸ Armstrong, *States of Affairs*. Dickinson ("God Knows") also construes facts as states of affairs in his acquaintance model of divine knowledge.

¹⁹ Adams, "Middle Knowledge."

might claim that the world has this property.²⁰ Then, by the direct acquaintance model of divine knowledge, God is directly acquainted with this instantiation. And just as I can know that the proposition *there are hippos* is true by being acquainted in perceptual experience with hippos, it seems that God can know that a counterfactual is true by being acquainted with the fact that grounds its being true.²¹

But Suárez's proposal has not proved popular, and, more generally, many contemporary Molinists and anti-Molinists alike deny that counterfactuals of freedom have grounds, whether or not they are true. So, it would be much better if we could formulate a mechanics of middle knowledge that didn't require such grounds. The key to developing such an account is to propose that God is directly acquainted with the truth of counterfactuals of freedom themselves, rather than merely with their grounds.²² Alston's direct acquaintance model of divine knowledge, when paired with the Armstrongian account of facts, gives us the material we need to develop this suggestion.

What exactly are true counterfactuals of freedom on the Molinist view? Evidently, they are truth-bearing entities that can be objects of knowledge and that exist explanatorily prior to creation. This suggests that they are either abstract propositions, or something else which can play the same theoretical role as abstract propositions, such as divine

²⁰ Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, considers and rejects proposals like this about various truths that he argues are ungrounded.

²¹ O'Connor, "Impossibility", claims that God knows contingent propositions by being acquainted with the facts that ground their truth.

²² Though I've never seen them in print, I've occasionally encountered nascent ideas that seem to be pointing in the direction of the model I sketch here. For example, I've seen the suggestion that God knows true counterfactuals of freedom by some kind of epistemic contact with the propositions themselves. And William Lane Craig suggests in an interview that God might know the future by having quasi-perceptual contact with propositions' instantiating truth values ("How Could God Know the Future? William Lane Craig #2" *Closer to Truth* interview clip. Interviewed by Robert Lawrence Kuhn. <https://www.closetotruth.com/series/how-could-god-know-the-future#video-2056>).

thoughts.²³ And since truth is a property, these propositions or proposition-like entities have the property *being true*.²⁴

Molinists may not all agree about the nature of the property *being true*. Those who think that true counterfactuals of freedom have grounds may want to say either that the property *being true* is a relation (e.g. a correspondence relation) between propositions and the facts that ground them, or that it is a property that propositions have in virtue of standing in some relation to the facts that ground them. But obviously Molinists who deny that true counterfactuals of freedom have grounds will not think of the property *being true* in either of these ways. Merricks, for example, explicitly disavows these views.²⁵ He argues that truth is a primitive extrinsic (but monadic) property. Since truth is extrinsic, whether a proposition is true depends on more than the proposition itself; it depends on the world. But for Merricks, that dependence is a matter of truth's extrinsicality alone, and not of truth's being or depending on some relation - such as a correspondence relation - between propositions and things in the world.

Regardless of what the Molinist thinks about the nature of the property *being true*, a proposition's instantiating that property qualifies as a fact in the Armstrongian sense; it is an instantiation of a property by an object. So, by Alston's model of divine knowledge, it will be a fact with which God is directly acquainted. Moreover, just as my direct acquaintance with facts about what is going on in my own mind is sufficient for my knowing those facts, so God's direct acquaintance with the fact that a counterfactual of freedom is true is sufficient for God to know the fact that that counterfactual of freedom is true.

This strikes me as a straightforward and at least *prima facie* unproblematic account of how God knows true counterfactuals of freedom. Moreover, it is a consequence of three theses, all of which have

²³ On the view that propositions are divine thoughts, see Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation"; Gould and Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism"; Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism"; and Keller, "The Argument from Intentionality".

²⁴ I take it for granted that there is such a property as truth. Deflationary views of truth which reject this assumption are beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁵ Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*.

been defended for independent reasons: (i) God is directly acquainted with every fact; (ii) facts are instantiations of properties by objects; and (iii) some counterfactuals of freedom instantiate *being true* (explanatorily prior to creation).

3 An Objection

Here is an objection which some readers might find tempting. One might worry that God's acquaintance with the fact that a counterfactual of freedom is true runs afoul of the traditional dogma that abstract objects such as propositions do not stand in causal relations. For one might think that, properly interpreted, this traditional commitment is incompatible with anything standing in a causal relation to the fact that a proposition is true. And one might also think that God can be acquainted with the fact that a proposition is true only if God is causally related to that fact.

The first thing to say here is that the problem doesn't even get off the ground for those who reject the traditional claim that abstract objects are causally inert. Nor does it get off the ground for those who construe propositions as divine thoughts, and so as concrete rather than abstract objects. Nor for those whose views supply suitable proxies for true propositions. For example, even if divine thoughts are not identical to the things we normally call propositions, God might still have a thought corresponding to each proposition, and those that correspond to true propositions will instantiate *being true*.²⁶ Then God could know true counterfactuals of freedom by being acquainted with the truth of God's own thoughts.²⁷

But suppose we set these suggestions aside. Even granting that propositions are abstract, that abstract objects are causally inert, and that (for some reason) neither divine thoughts nor anything else could serve

²⁶ By 'thought' I do not mean 'belief', for obviously God does not *believe* every proposition, since God does not believe false propositions. This point is made by Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation".

²⁷ Dickinson, "God Knows", suggests something very similar about God's knowledge of non-present facts.

as a suitable proxy for propositions, it is not obvious that there is a problem here. For God's acquaintance with the fact that a proposition is true does not obviously imply that God is causally related to that fact.

Again, the Cartesian ego case is helpful. The direct acquaintance relation between a Cartesian ego and its thoughts is not a causal relation, nor does it seem to depend on one. You might think that the occurrence of any conscious thought *T* in the ego's mental life causes the ego to be acquainted with *T*. But although I grant that the ego is acquainted with *T* because *T* occurs in the ego's conscious mental life, I think that this 'because' is tracking a grounding relation rather than a causal relation. After all, you couldn't sever the connection between these facts by tampering with the laws of nature as you can with an ordinary causal connection. It is metaphysically necessary that, if a conscious thought occurs to a mind, then that mind is acquainted with that thought. That's a reason to think this is a case of grounding rather than a case of causation.

Similarly, for any fact *F*, it is metaphysically necessary that, if *F* obtains, then God is acquainted with *F*. So, while it is true that God is acquainted with *F* because *F* obtains, it's plausible that this 'because' is tracking a grounding relation rather than a causal relation.

At this point, the critic might revise her objection and claim that God's acquaintance with the truth of a proposition entails, not that the truth of the proposition itself stands in causal relations, but that God's acquaintance with the truth of the proposition stands in causal relations. For just as our knowledge causally influences our choices, God's acquaintance with the truth of various propositions will causally influence God's volitions.²⁸ And one might worry that this violates the traditional commitment that abstract objects are causally inert.

This revised version of the objection is not very promising. For one thing, some theists argue that divine agency is entirely non-causal in nature.²⁹ But even if it isn't, it is not obvious that the fact in question could not causally influence divine volitions. After all, even we mortals

²⁸ That God's knowledge of true counterfactuals of freedom influences God's creative volition(s) is, in fact, a commitment of Molinism.

²⁹ Pearce, "Foundational Grounding."

– or at least those of us who know that there are such things as propositions – are aware that some propositions instantiate the property *being true* (though of course this awareness is not direct in the way that God’s is). And this awareness seems to causally influence our actions and other mental states.

For example, consider using simple mathematical truths to calculate more complex ones. Via calculations like these, it seems that my awareness that certain mathematical propositions instantiate *being true* can cause me to become aware that certain more complex mathematical propositions also instantiate *being true*. Now, this causal influence either entails that propositions themselves are in some way causally related to the world, or it doesn’t. If it does, then the traditional dogma that abstract objects are causally inert is false. If it doesn’t, then an agent can be causally influenced by the fact that the agent is aware of a proposition’s truth without violating the traditional dogma.³⁰

³⁰ A referee raises another worry. Given the standard semantics for counterfactuals in terms of closeness relations between possible worlds, God could know counterfactuals of freedom about non-actual agents only by being able to discern which of multiple qualitatively indiscernible worlds are closest to the actual world. This would require that God has epistemic access either to non-qualitative differences between worlds, or to brute differences between them. Both of those options seem implausible.

But I don’t see why we should accept the referee’s claim that God could know the relevant counterfactuals only by discerning certain closeness relations between worlds. On the model I have sketched, God knows true counterfactuals by being acquainted with their instantiations of being true, not by being acquainted with closeness relations between worlds; and God’s acquaintance with these facts is direct, rather than being mediated by closeness relations between worlds or anything else. And all of this seems perfectly coherent. Apart from some independent reason to think that this model fails, we are in no position to claim that God could know the relevant counterfactuals only by discerning certain closeness relations between worlds.

Maybe the referee’s thought is that God can be acquainted with the truth of the relevant counterfactuals only if they are true, and they are true only if closeness relations between worlds are sensitive to non-qualitative or brute facts, which is implausible. But this objection only threatens God’s knowledge of the relevant counterfactuals by way of threatening the truth of those counterfactuals, and therefore it falls outside the scope of my project. For recall that my aim is to argue that God can know the relevant counterfactuals *given certain assumptions*, one of which is that the relevant counterfactuals are indeed true.

4 Responding to Some Anti-Molinist Arguments

So, it seems to me that God could know true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating by being directly acquainted with the facts which consist in those counterfactuals instantiating the property *being true*. And we have seen that this mechanics of middle knowledge follows from theses that have been defended by others on independent grounds.

With this mechanics of middle knowledge in hand, we can now see why certain anti-Molinist arguments in the literature – those which claim that there is no mechanism by which God could know true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating – are unsuccessful.

For example, Timothy O'Connor avers that, if God knows true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating, then God must be directly acquainted with the grounds of those counterfactuals. But since counterfactuals of freedom lack such grounds, God does not know them.³¹ O'Connor seems to overlook the possibility that God might know true counterfactuals of freedom by being directly acquainted with the truth of those counterfactuals themselves.

Kathrin Rogers and Richard Swinburne (independently) contend that, if God knows true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating, then the agents and/or actions involved in those counterfactuals are causally linked to relevant divine mental states. But those agents and/or actions are not causally linked to relevant divine mental states, since they don't exist at all. So, God does not know true counterfactuals of freedom infallibly and explanatorily prior to creating.³² But like O'Connor, Rogers and Swinburne seem to overlook the possibility that God might know true counterfactuals of freedom by being directly acquainted with the truth of those counterfactuals

³¹ O'Connor, "Impossibility."

³² Rogers, "Omniscience." Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 256. Cf. Baras, "A Reliability Challenge."

themselves, rather than by being causally linked to the agents and/or actions that they are about.

Taking a slightly different approach, Hugh McCann argues that God lacks adequate evidence about which counterfactuals of freedom are true explanatorily prior to creating.³³ But it seems clear that a subject who is directly acquainted with a fact thereby knows that fact. Maybe this means that direct acquaintance with a fact is a way of knowing a fact without evidence. Or maybe it means that a subject who is directly acquainted with a fact thereby has evidence for that fact (e.g., perhaps the fact is self-evident for any such subject). Either way, the mechanics of middle knowledge sketched above seems to undermine McCann's argument.

Finally, Alan Gehring canvasses a variety of possible mechanisms of middle knowledge and criticizes each of them.³⁴ But he does not consider the possibility that God might be directly acquainted with the truth of true counterfactuals of freedom. So, his argument is not successful either.

In short, arguments that there is no mechanism by which God could know true counterfactuals of freedom fail because they overlook the plausible suggestion that God is directly acquainted with the truth of the relevant counterfactuals. I conclude that Molinists face no serious problem about the mechanism of middle knowledge over and above the standard objections to their view.³⁵

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³³ McCann, "The Free Will Defence."

³⁴ Gehring, *Truthmaker Theory*, 378-392.

³⁵ Thanks to Dan Dake for helpful discussion of this material, and to David Turon, Mark Murphy, and referees for this journal for comments on earlier drafts.

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