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Truth-Makers and the “Grounding Objection” to Molinism

Tyler Crown

I. Introduction

One of the most discussed topics on the nature of God, in Christian circles today, is the subject of God’s knowledge. There are a few popular positions today that are engaged in a serious debate as to which view most accurately supports the biblical and philosophical understanding of the nature of God’s knowledge. One such position, which has become increasingly popular and has found support among many leading Christian philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Flint and William Lane Craig, is called Molinism.¹ While Molinism does have an abundance of supporters, there are many detractors as well. Calvinist’s, Thomists and open theists have been waging a war against Molinism for many years.² An objection that has been brought against Molinism by these detractors, which is considered by John D. Laing, author of the article “Middle Knowledge,” to be the most popular objection, is called the “grounding objection.”³ In this paper, I will

¹ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, (Erscheinungsort Nicht Ermitteltbar: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 6.

² Kenneth J. Perszyk, "Recent Work on Molinism," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 8 (2013): 762-63, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/phc3.12057>

³ John D. Laing, "Middle Knowledge," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn/#SSH3b.iv>.

argue that the so-called “grounding objection” fails to defeat Molinism because it is based on a theory of the connection of truth and reality, called truth-maker theory, which is controversial. I will also show how, even if one were to accept truth-maker theory, one could still avoid the objection.

II. Background Information

Before I begin to discuss the grounding objection and the arguments defending Molinism against it, I think it is important to give some background information for the Molinist position. Molinism was originally conceived during the Counter-Reformation by the sixteenth century Spanish Jesuit theologian and philosopher Luis de Molina (1535-1600) as a response to the positions of the reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, who denied creaturely freedom.⁴ Support for the Molinist position abated for a while, but was revived by Alvin Plantinga when he proposed his free will defense against the problem of evil.⁵ Ever since then, Molinism has seen a resurgence in interest and has become a more prominent viewpoint among modern theologians and scholars. The basic idea behind Molinism is stated well by Alexander Zambrano in his article “Truthmaker and the Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge,” where he says, “The crux of the Molinist account is that God has middle knowledge: that is,

⁴ Kenneth J. Perszyk, "Introduction," In *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

logically prior to the actual world, God knows true *counterfactuals of freedom*, propositions describing what every logically possible person would freely do in every logically possible situation God could place her in.”⁶

One aspect of Molinism that should be stated is its strict adherence to Libertarian freedom. However, it also upholds a strong view of God’s providence. The overall goal of Molinism is to allow one to accept that God can be sovereign over His creation without accepting causal determinism. Molinism seeks to achieve this through God’s knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (hereafter referred to as CCFs), i.e. what every logically possible person would freely do in every logically possible situation God could place that person in. The reason why, according to the Molinist, CCFs would work is, if God can know all logically possible decisions and outcomes of free creatures, then He can, logically prior to His creative act, determine which combination of free creatures, placed in specific time periods, would lead to the fulfillment of His ultimate will. Because God is merely instantiating a person, knowing what that person is going to do in the specific place that person is instantiated, while at the same time not determining that person’s actions, He is able to plan out the world according to His will, while also keeping intact the freedom of these instantiated persons.

⁶ Alexander Zambrano, "Truthmaker and the Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge," *Aporia* 21, no. 2 (2011): 19, http://aporia.byu.edu/pdfs/zambrano-truthmaker_and_the_grounding_objection_to_middle_knowledge.pdf.

III. Reasons for Accepting Molinism

Why do scholars like Craig and Plantinga accept Molinism? One reason why this view seems to be viable is that we, as finite human beings, appear to have the ability to know the truth values of some CCFs.⁷ For instance, it seems reasonable for me to say that the following proposition is true: *If I had been sick with the stomach flu on Sunday, April 1, 2018, I would have chosen not to attend the 11 o'clock Easter service at my church.* Furthermore, it also seems reasonable for me to say that the proposition *If Michael Jackson had his larynx removed when he was 26, then he would have chosen to continue his singing career* is false. However, regardless of whether these propositions are true or false, it seems reasonable to give them a truth value. These examples appear to show that I can have knowledge of the truth value of events that have not, nor ever will transpire. So why could not God have this knowledge?

Another reason in favor of the Molinist account is that there appear to be passages in the Bible that portray God as knowing CCFs. Take, for example, Matthew 11:23 where Jesus says, “And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.” Or

⁷ William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection,'" Reasonable Faith, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/divine-omniscience/middle-knowledge-truth-makers-and-the-grounding-objection/>.

take the famous example of Saul and David in 1 Samuel 23:7-13, where David is staying in Keilah after defeating the Philistines. He hears rumors that Saul is on his way to besiege the city to try to kill or capture him, so he asks God if Saul will in fact do this and if he does, whether the people of Keilah will give him over to Saul. God answers in the affirmative for both questions, leading David to flee the city. Here is where this example gets interesting. Neither of these events ever take place, i.e. Saul besieging the city and the people giving David up to Saul.

However, God still knew that these events would take place if the original circumstances had been maintained, i.e. David had stayed in Keilah. Both biblical passages demonstrate that God knows something about the free choices of human beings that never transpire but could have transpired, given the proper set of circumstances. In other words, according to scripture, God appears to know some CCFs.

IV. The Grounding Objection to Molinism

Now that I have given some background information for Molinism and a few of the reasons why it has been considered a viable position by some philosophers and theologians, what exactly is the grounding objection to Molinism?⁸ There are a few ways of stating this objection, however the following statement will suffice to get the main point of the objection across. In short, the grounding objection

⁸ I have in mind scholars like William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Flint and Kenneth Keathley, among a host of others.

states “that there are or can be no contingently true counterfactuals of freedom because there is nothing in reality that ‘grounds’ their truth or ‘makes’ them true (in contemporary parlance, they have no ‘truth-makers’).”⁹ A truth-maker is something like an object or state of affairs that exists in the real world. So, a counterfactual of creaturely freedom cannot be true because there is no state of affairs or object to which the counterfactual refers. Consider the example of Saul and David. In this example, there is a given CCF, namely that if David were to stay in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city and the people of Keilah would freely choose to give David over to Saul. However, what gives this proposition a truth value? David did not stay in Keilah, so there is no state of affairs to ground the given proposition. Furthermore, there is no object, namely a David that would stay in Keilah, to ground the truth value of this proposition because there is not an object, a David, that ever stayed in Keilah in the given circumstance.

Traditionally, God is said to know all things that will actually be the case. So, the reason why God knew that David would leave Keilah is that David did in fact leave Keilah. However, according to the grounding objection, there is neither a state of affairs nor an object to ground the truth value of the given CCF about the people of Keilah and Saul.

⁹ Perszyk, "Introduction," 7.

There have been those who have thought that maybe CCFs could be grounded in the will of God, but this is problematic for the libertarian because, by grounding CCFs in the will of God, one is suggesting CCFs are determined by God.¹⁰ So, this cannot be a possibility for the grounding of CCFs either, at least not if one wishes to maintain libertarian freedom.

One of the primary opponents of Molinism, as well as one of the main proponents of the grounding objection, is William Hasker. In his article “The (Non-)Existence of Molinist Counterfactuals” Hasker formulates a grounding principle in order to argue against the truth value of Molinist counterfactuals.¹¹ His formulation goes as follows:

(GP) Any true contingent proposition is true in virtue of the existence or non-existence of some concrete object.¹²

Hasker clarifies that the notion of existence, in this principle, is to be taken trans-temporally, i.e. that if a thing exists, it exists now, in the past and/or in the future.¹³ So, another way one could reformulate this principle, as Thomas Flint does, is as follows:

¹⁰ Perszyk, "Recent Work on Molinism," 758.

¹¹ William Hasker, "The (Non-)Existence of Molinist Counterfactuals," in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27-29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*

(GP') Any true contingent proposition is true in virtue of some concrete state of affairs that does exist, or has existed, or will exist.¹⁴

Given this version of the grounding principle, propositions about states of affairs that have, do or will exist are grounded because they have something concrete to which the propositions actually refer. However, this leaves CCFs again ungrounded because they have no such concrete states of affairs.

V. Truth-Maker Theory and the Grounding of Objection

Having explained the overall grounding objection to Molinism, is it true that Molinist counterfactuals have no grounding? William Lane Craig in his article "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection," notes that the grounding objection presupposes a view of the relation of truth and reality, called Truth-Maker Theory (TMT).¹⁵ TMT posits that, for a proposition to have a truth-value (to be a truth-bearer) there must be some entity that makes that proposition true or false (a truth-maker). This seems to be a rather acceptable presupposition. How can a proposition be true if it does not have something that it refers to, which makes it true, i.e. a real state of affairs or object?

However, Craig identifies some propositions that would not fit this principle; categories that we naturally assume contain a truth value. For instance, negative existential propositions would not fit TMT as truth bearers. Take for example the

¹⁴ Hasker, "The (Non-)Existence of Molinist Counterfactuals," 27.

¹⁵ Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection.'"

proposition *Frodo Baggins does not exist* which we would consider true. To clarify, by the non-existence of Frodo Baggins, I am referring to the idea that there is no ontologically existing state of affairs or object that gives the character in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series named Frodo Baggins ontological existence. Obviously, Frodo Baggins is real in some sense by virtue of being a character in a book, however he has no true ontological existence. So, in the given example, there is no concrete entity that the statement refers to. Therefore, it is neither true nor false that Frodo Baggins does not exist. This can be applied to any negative existential proposition, such as *Zeus does not exist*, or *The tooth fairy does not exist*. These are propositions that we typically consider to be true.

However, according to TMT they have no truth value because they have no truth-maker.

Another set of statements that would not be considered as carrying truth values, according to TMT, are past and future tense statements about persons who no longer exist or have not yet come into existence. Take, for example, a proposition like *Socrates was sentenced to death by poisoning*. Socrates no longer exists (at least according to the dynamic theory of time) and therefore statements related to him bear no truth. For there is now no existing object or state of affairs related to Socrates that would ground the statement. An example of a future-tense proposition such as *The governor of Virginia in the year 2100 will be a Latino* does not bear a truth value either, because there is no currently existing object or

state of affairs to ground the statement. Another example that better shows the inadequacy of this view is a proposition like *I will go home for the summer* compared to a proposition like *I am going home for the summer*. Because there is no present state of affairs to ground the proposition *I will go home for the summer* there is no truth-value in the proposition. Now, one might assert that there will be a truth-maker at the time that the proposition refers to, namely that I do go home for summer.¹⁶ However, this would not make the proposition, *I will go home for the summer*, true. Instead, it will make the proposition, *I am going home for the summer* true. In agreement with this idea, Craig states:

Some assert that past- and future-tensed statements literally have (present-tense) no truth-makers, although they either did or will. This suggestion is problematic, however, because when the truth-maker of, say, a future-tense sentence like "Bush will be inaugurated as our forty-second President" becomes present, then that statement, far from being true, is false, and the corresponding present-tense statement, "Bush is being inaugurated as our forty-second President" is or becomes true.¹⁷

The conclusion that future-tense statements are never true seems to be absurd, but it is what logically follows if one accepts TMT.

It appears as though TMT has some issues of its own to work out. In addition to the problem outlined above, according to Craig, TMT has suffered greatly

¹⁶ Steven B. Cowan, "The Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge Revisited," *Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2003): 96-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008449>.

¹⁷ Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection."

because it has not been articulated in depth by any of its advocates.¹⁸

Furthermore, it has primarily been presupposed by those who accept it but has not been defended in any meaningful way as of now. However, even if TMT had a more robust defense there are still ways to reconcile Molinist CCFs with TMT.

VI. Reconciling Molinist CCFs with TMT

One proposal that attempts to reconcile Molinism's need for CCFs and TMT suggest that the grounds for the truth value of CCFs are the essences of individuals that exist in the pre-creative mind of God.¹⁹ In other words, God has a concept of all possible beings, logically prior to the creative act, and from those concepts He chooses which ones to actualize into beings, which would thereby allow him to plan out the best possible world that would at the same time match up to His overall will for creation.²⁰ This view seems reasonable. For to deny the claim that God knows essences of beings logically prior to the creative act would force one to deny God's ability to have knowledge of the actual world logically prior to the creative act. For, according to TMT, there would be no grounding object or state of affairs that exists logically prior to the creative act to ground such propositions, even if the propositions will, following the creative act, have a

¹⁸ Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection."

¹⁹ Laing, "Middle Knowledge."

²⁰ Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 39-40; Perszyk, "Recent Work on Molinism," 758-759.

truth-maker. If someone posits that God knows those whom He created logically prior to creating them, then they must assert a similar if not identical position as the Molinist.

A second reconciliation option is to take a position that those whom God has “created” have always existed in some way, even logically prior to the creative act. However, while I doubt any Molinist, let alone any orthodox Christian, would want to assert such a claim, the Molinist could just as easily assert either one of these positions for CCFs.

A third possibility would be to deny God’s omniscience altogether, which is the least desirable outcome for most Christians. So, it seems reasonable to assert the claim that there are an infinite number of possible beings, each with their own essence, the essence of which God knows logically prior to the creative act, thereby grounding the truth value of CCFs. This response would also correspond nicely to Hasker’s grounding principle, in that it would allow the Molinist to make a revision to it. The revision would look something like this:

(GP+) Any true contingent proposition is true in virtue of some concrete state of affairs that does exist, or has existed, or will exist, or would exist (under specified conditions).²¹

This principle would work because if one denies the grounding for CCFs on the basis of TMT, then one would also have to deny that there is grounding for past

²¹ Thomas P. Flint, “Whence and Whither the Molinist Debate: A Reply to Hasker,” in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39.

and future contingent propositions. However, it does not seem at all desirable to adhere to such a principle. Therefore, it seems as though the Molinist has found a way of reconciling TMT with CCFs.

VII. Objections to Reconciling TMT with Molinism

While there are some who believe that grounding is necessary for CCFs, there are also those who deny this claim. One of the primary deniers of the claim that CCFs require truth-makers is Trenton Merricks. The main reason why he denies the claim goes back to examples, primarily negative existential statements, that seem to have a truth value, yet lack a truth-maker. His main example is the proposition *There are no white ravens*.²² He states that this proposition is true, but that the statement has nothing to ground it. Alternatively, he argues that the truth of the proposition depends not on there being a specific concrete object to ground the truth value of the proposition, but rather it depends on the way the world is, “That there are no white ravens is true. It is true because of how the world is. Specifically, it is true because there are no white ravens.”²³ While it may sound as though Merricks is giving a truth-maker, namely a state of affairs of the world, as grounding for this proposition, this is not the case, as he further states,

That truth depends on the world is not the thesis that, for each truth, there is something in the world to which that truth “corresponds.” Nor is it the thesis that every truth has a

²² Trenton Merricks, “Truth and Molinism,” in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Kenneth J. Perszyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68.

“truthmaker.” Nor is it even the thesis that there is a *depends on* or a *because* relation that holds between each truth and (some part of) the world.²⁴

Relating this back to the example of the white ravens he states,

...it is a matter of controversy whether there is some entity—such as the state of affairs of the universe’s lacking white ravens—to which that truth corresponds. Likewise, it is controversial whether that truth has a truthmaker. Similarly, it is controversial whether that truth stands in a *depends on* or a *because* relation to some relatum, a relatum like (again) the state of affairs of the universe’s lacking white ravens. But even so, it should not be at all controversial that that there are no white ravens is true because there are no white ravens.²⁵

So, how does this relate to CCFs? Merricks continues by giving an example of a CCF:

(1) If S were in C, S would freely do A.²⁶

He then continues, saying:

Counterfactual (1) is true because of how the world is. In particular, (1) is true because if S were in C, S would freely do A. This is how things are even if—as we are now supposing—(1) is unfulfilled. Of course, Molinists believe that there are many other true counterfactuals of freedom. The truth of each of these counterfactuals, like the truth of (1), depends on the world.²⁷

²⁴ Merricks, "Truth and Molinism," 62.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Now, Merricks argument is not new to himself. This line of argument is a formulation of a brute fact argument, and in its basic form it argues that, given a specific state of affairs, it is just true that the given proposition is correct.²⁸ While this may seem like a simplistic response, it is one that is quite popular; having proponents in respected philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Thomas Flint.

VIII. Some Final Thoughts

Before I conclude, there is one final point that needs to be made, which is stated nicely by Craig. Craig argues that it is not required that the Molinist give the actual way that God foreknows CCFs, but rather merely a possible way that God foreknows CCFs. For, as Craig states, “Who are human beings that they should know how God foreknows the future?”²⁹ Whether one wants to identify pre-existent essences in the mind of God as the grounding for counterfactuals, or to follow Merricks lead and claim that CCFs are just brute facts based on how the world is, it is clear there are variety of ways God could know CCFs, each of which is compatible with Molinism. Furthermore, the burden of proof does not lie with the Molinist to prove the existence of CCFs. As Craig states, “For that assumption is simply one of the postulates of the theory, which must be assessed

²⁸ Cowan, 98-99.

²⁹ Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 40.

as a whole in terms of typical criteria of theory assessment.”³⁰ As a defense for this position, Craig uses Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity. In this theory, Einstein assumed the so-called Light Postulate, which asserts that light travels in vacuo at a constant speed.³¹ Now, there is no data to support this claim, however, as Craig asserts, this theory is widely accepted because of its overall coherence. This, Craig believes, is how Molinism should be treated.

IX. Conclusion

While there are aspects of Molinism that still require further defense and argumentation, I do not think that the grounding objection has a strong claim against Molinism. As I have discussed in this paper, there are a few different directions one can go to ground CCFs. Furthermore, I have given a credible argument from Merricks for why CCFs do not need to be grounded at all. So, in agreement with many Molinist scholars, it would seem that this objection has been successfully answered, at least in a way that can provide the Molinist with a response that shifts the burden of proof to the critic of Molinism.³²

In this paper, I have argued that the so-called “grounding objection” fails to defeat Molinism because it is based on a theory of the connection of truth and

³⁰ William Lane Craig, "Ducking Friendly Fire: Davison on the Grounding Objection," *Reasonable Faith*, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/divine-omniscience/ducking-friendly-fire-davison-on-the-grounding-objection/>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Perszyk, "Introduction," 8.

reality, called truth-maker theory, which is very controversial. I have also shown how, even if one were to accept truth-maker theory, one could avoid the grounding objection.

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