

# “Middle Knowledge”: Solution or Seduction?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this article, Henri Blocher examines the status and function of “middle knowledge,” a proposed median between determinism and indeterminism, and one that satisfies our natural aspirations to freedom. The theses of Molina and Suarez in particular are carefully presented and evaluated, with reference to the thought of one of their recent capable advocates, William Lane Craig. The seduction of the “middle knowledge” thesis provides an opportunity for reflection and wisdom, and particularly for humility that bows the knee to the mystery of godliness.

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**I**n common parlance, the term *Calvinism* is used to reference John Calvin’s strong demonstration of sovereign, unconditional election—not that the French Reformer was the first (or the last!) to defend it, but because it was he who presented the most thorough and convincing biblical justification for it. He did not persuade everyone, however. Many Christians, including evangelicals, complain that Calvinism suppresses what they call free will, which, they maintain, is an inherent aspect of humanity. Attempts to find a way of reconciling free will and sovereignty, or an intermediary position between them to explain the choices made by grace—which always have the effect of watering down God’s sovereignty—are to be found throughout the history of theology.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was translated from French by Alison Wells: “La ‘Science moyenne’: solution ou séduction?,” in *Contre vents et marées: Mélanges offerts à Pierre Berthoud et Paul Wells*, ed. Jean-Philippe Bru (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma; Cléon d’Andran: Excelsis, 2014), 113–34.

The theory called “middle knowledge” may be the subtlest attempt to be made so far.<sup>2</sup> The key idea came, apparently, from a Portuguese theologian, Pedro du Fonseca (1565), but it was a former student of his, the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535–1600), who coined the term and attached his name to the doctrine which is commonly called Molinism. In 1588 he brought out a voluminous work that made its mark at the time; the second edition in 1595 included arguments in reply to criticisms, particularly those made by the vigorous Dominican Domingo Bañez, an Augustinian Thomist. Its title can be translated *The Reconciliation of Free Choice with the Gifts of Grace, Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Reprobation*.<sup>3</sup>

Among the controversies this unleashed was a modified version of Molinism of which the chief proponent was another noteworthy Jesuit of the day, Francisco Suarez (1548–1617). Thereafter the general of the order made this version the official doctrine of the Society of Jesus. Suarez’s epitaph gives an idea of the high regard in which he was held:

Master (in the sense of doctor) of the whole world, (new) Aristotle in natural science, angelic Thomas (doctor) in divinity, Jerome for the Scriptures, Ambrose in the pulpit, Augustine in apologetics, Athanasius in explaining the faith, Bernard in honey-sweet piety, Gregory for handling of the Holy Books and the Word.<sup>4</sup>

That is quite a tribute!

The doctrine of middle knowledge was well received by the Remonstrants; Arminius took the trouble to examine it. The great theologians of orthodox reformed theology, however, sought to refute it. During the following centuries, it was largely forgotten in Protestantism; the theory slid into theological backwaters. Over the last few decades, however, it has come back into the limelight, thanks to American evangelicals. In his 1974 work, *The Nature of Necessity*, the reputed philosopher Alvin Plantinga brought it back into prominence, albeit with a new slant, without even realizing that it originated with Molina.<sup>5</sup> Several others followed, among them eminent scholars such

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Wells mentions this in particular in “L’élection divine: les enjeux,” *La Revue réformée* 59.5 (2008): 21–37.

<sup>3</sup> Luis de Molina, *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione, concordia* (Antwerp: Joachim Trognæsius, 1595) available on Google.books. I will quote as it is presented there. I will not use the numbered subdivisions found in current academic works, as these are not used in the edition in question; the abridged title is *Concordia*. Unless otherwise indicated, I have translated myself any sources in a foreign language (usually titles).

<sup>4</sup> Available (in Latin) in the online encyclopedia *Imago Mundi*.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); John D. Laing, “The Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47.3 (September 2004): 455, following what Plantinga said in his autobiographical comments.

as Alfred Freddoso, who translated the most relevant part of the *Concordia*, and the apologetic theologian-philosopher William Lane Craig, who has done an impressive job in defending *scientia media* in a host of publications, using his considerable conceptual agility and knife-sharp logic.<sup>6</sup>

“Indeed,” writes Craig, “I would venture to say that it is the single most fruitful theological concept I have ever encountered.”<sup>7</sup> Craig is considered to be its leading advocate among theologians, even if he argues his case as a philosopher from an “analytic” approach, and though his logical algebra is inaccessible to the uninitiated. It is striking that most of the new Molinists are of a philosophical bent. Middle knowledge, according to Craig,

can go a long way toward reconciling Calvinist and Arminian views. ... Molina’s successor Suarez came so close to Calvinism that it is scarcely possible to distinguish their doctrines of predestination; yet Suarez did not sacrifice human freedom.<sup>8</sup>

The debate about foreknowledge, which takes into account both middle knowledge and “open theism,” has taken on such magnitude and represents such a challenge that “some claim it is the most heated controversy to hit evangelicalism since the inerrancy debate in the 1970s.”<sup>9</sup>

This debate has barely had an airing in my native French Protestantism, and it seems opportune to give an overview of its theses and arguments, although I speak as a theologian rather than as a philosopher. I will introduce not only Molina himself, but also Craig’s propositions as representative of the movement, then take the liberty of giving a final “pinch of spice” of my own, by adding a few general comments to my commentary.

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<sup>6</sup> From his doctoral research William L. Craig drew both *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez*, Studies in Intellectual History 7 (Leyden: Brill, 1988), and *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience*, Studies in Intellectual History 19 (Leyden: Brill, 1991; hereafter *Foreknowledge and Freedom*); this was made available to a wider readership in *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987; there is a later edition). Several articles or chapters are available, especially “Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?,” in *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995), 141–64 (hereafter *Grace and Will*), and “The Middle Knowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 119–43 (hereafter *Four Views*).

<sup>7</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Beilby and Eddy, introduction to *Four Views*, 9.

## I. *The Molinist Thesis*

What is meant by *middle* knowledge? If it is a middle way, what are the extremes between which it seeks to navigate? Molina, Craig, and all those who adopt their way of thinking are as clear as one could wish. Molina's starting point is the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas—all his work is a commentary on the *Summa Theologica* (I.14.13). The Angelic Doctor distinguishes *two* forms of divine knowledge: the knowledge that is *necessary* only to God, belonging to his very nature, including the knowledge of all possible possibilities and of all their possible combinations, and the knowledge *free* of everything that will be and even that could have been, on the basis of his *decree*. (It is free in that it depends on the exercise of divine will.) Molina attributes to God a *third*, intermediary knowledge: *before* all exercise of his will (before and after refer to logical order), by his very nature, God knows from all eternity how free creatures would behave in any circumstance and that prescience, infallible like all divine prescience, plays a part in the deliberation of the decree. This is how Molina phrases his thesis:

It is suitable for us to distinguish a triple knowledge in God, its third form being therefore “middle knowledge,” by which God, in his own essence, owing to the power and the supremacy of his inscrutable wisdom, considers every instance of free will and what each, in its innate freedom, would do, placed in such or such a configuration of things, or again in an infinity of configurations, in which each could do the contrary, if so willed.<sup>10</sup>

According to necessary knowledge “natural” to God, God knows what a free agent *could* do; according to free knowledge God knows what the agent *will* do; according to middle knowledge, he knows what the free agent *would* do if ....<sup>11</sup>

What is the problem Molina proposed to resolve? The very same one that Evodius raised for Augustine, as Plantinga so judiciously points out.<sup>12</sup> In Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* (3.2.4), Evodius is concerned by the question: if God knew in advance that man was going to fall, was the fall not necessary rather than free? Jonathan Edwards, Plantinga points out, came up with an argument of consummate skill, demonstrating that everything infallibly

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<sup>10</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 227, disputatio 52.

<sup>11</sup> For a clear presentation, see Craig, *Four Views*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out,” in *The Analytical Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 258–59; repr. from *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984).

known in advance by God comes about by necessity.<sup>13</sup> However, Molina and his followers are not prepared to relinquish either the infallible foreknowledge of God or the liberty of free will, understood as the effective power of opposites, as the possibility of saying *yes* and *no* at one and the same time, with only the will of the subject to determine it.<sup>14</sup> Hence the strategic situation of middle knowledge, which is attacked on the left by those who deny total foreknowledge (the proponents of open theism) and on the right by Augustinians and Calvinists who have a different conception of freedom.

Molina was too rooted in tradition to challenge, even superficially, the article concerning divine foreknowledge; in occupying the middle way, he rather tends to enlarge its scope even more! It is worth noting the effort Craig puts into defending the traditional position in opposition to open theists. He is in no way rattled by Gregory Boyd in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. He enters firmly into the controversy with philosopher William Hasker, a man of logical ability equal to his own.<sup>15</sup> The wealth of biblical support is such<sup>16</sup> that we can be fully satisfied with his firmness without any more being said on the subject.<sup>17</sup>

However, Molina and the Molinists are unwilling to let go of free will in any way. For them it is vital to maintain the concept that American writers call “libertarian,” an adjective I hesitate to use myself because of its political connotations. We could call it “absolutist,” as the choice to be free must be strictly independent (*ab-solutus*: un-tied). Or rather, a more accurate term

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 261, quoting Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (1745), section 12.

<sup>14</sup> Craig gives an accurate account of Molina’s position: “He held to a view of temporal necessity as strong as that of any fatalist, maintaining that if God believed *p*, there is no longer any possibility in either the divided or composite sense of God’s believing  $\sim p$ ; nevertheless, he held that it is within a free agent’s power to bring it about that  $\sim p$ ” (*Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 196).

<sup>15</sup> See the account in the excellent work of Travis James Campbell, “Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique,” 10–13, *Monergism*, 2017, [monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Middle Knowledge.pdf](http://monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Middle%20Knowledge.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> I mention the remarkable rebuttal of open theism by Clayton Diltz, “Is Divine Foreknowledge like a Box of Chocolates?,” 26–43 (36–43 on the evidence of Isa 41ff.), [www.brethren-assembly.com/Ebooks/OpenTheism.pdf](http://www.brethren-assembly.com/Ebooks/OpenTheism.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Some leading French intellectuals, although not theologians, have attacked foreknowledge without being aware of “open theism,” but with similar motives. Maurice Clavel affirmed, “Dieu qui nous aime et nous recherche et nous prie, nous, libres, pourquoi ne serait-il pas contraint d’improviser, puisque nous sommes imprévisibles?” (*Qui t’a fait homme? “Recherches et expériences spirituelles—Libres dans l’Esprit,”* Conferences at Notre-Dame de Paris, November 30, 1975, 11). Pierre Chauvu protests against Calvin’s “conception rigide de la totale prescience” (Pierre Chauvu, *La Violence de Dieu* [Paris: Laffont, 1992], 94); he also speaks of salvation as a “géniale improvisation” (*ibid.*, 103, and *Ce que je crois* [Paris: Grasset, 1982], 183) and of creation as “un processus évolutif à haut risque” in which the creator himself is “fragile et vulnérable” (*ibid.*). Finally, he elaborates on free will and its “irréductible autonomie” (*ibid.*, 246).

would be “indeterministic,” as this excludes any sense of determinism.<sup>18</sup> Molina wrote *disputatio* upon *disputatio* above all to show free will to be such (in particular *disputationes* 23 and 24, although before that in 21 and 18 he examines the biblical passages used to argue against him). Even Cardinal Bellarmine himself complained about the relentless heaviness of his style!<sup>19</sup> For an act to be free, “it is not enough for it to be spontaneous.”<sup>20</sup> If God predetermines something, liberty dies, and it is not sufficient to refer to a “dual causality.”<sup>21</sup> That is true even of the freedom of the man Jesus himself.<sup>22</sup>

Aids to receiving grace are not effective in and of themselves, but only through the cooperation of free will.<sup>23</sup> As with the case later against the Jansenists, the all-or-nothing argument tacitly assimilated the contrary opinion with “Luther’s heresy”: Bañez had better watch out!<sup>24</sup> Craig finds Molina clear sighted on what the Reformers opted for: “Luther and Calvin were prepared to grant to man only spontaneity of choice and voluntariness of will, not the ability to choose otherwise in the circumstances in which the agent finds himself.”<sup>25</sup> However, for Craig this capacity is essential: “This liberty of indifference is a fact of experience, is theologically presupposed by the existence of sin, and is taught by the Scriptures and the church fathers.”<sup>26</sup> He declares bluntly: “I assume here a libertarian view of freedom.”<sup>27</sup>

When the question of evil comes up, the debate becomes even more intense. In several *disputationes* (31–34), Molina gives a theological and biblical demonstration that God is not the cause of sin, but that free will (not determined by God) is.<sup>28</sup> Craig shares the feeling that the other conception makes God the author of evil. He goes as far as to write, “The Augustinian-

<sup>18</sup> Paul Helm uses it in his reply to Craig in *Four Views*, 156.

<sup>19</sup> From Alfred J. Freddoso, preface to *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, by Luis de Molina, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), x.

<sup>20</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 251, *disputatio* 53, *Membrum* 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. It can be argued that free will, when considered in itself, abstractly, *in sensu diviso*, is not determined, but it is determined concretely *in sensu composito*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 269, *disputatio* 53, *Membrum* 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 242, *disputatio* 53, *Membrum* 1.

<sup>24</sup> Bañez, an Augustinian Thomist, teaches that it is God in his grace who determines and inserts a “physical premonition” in human will. There is some ambiguity in the position of Thomas Aquinas, who often speaks like an Augustinian through and through. In his *Summa Theologiae* I–II.10.4, he maintains that God moves the will without determining it *ad unum*. Was that a lapsus or an extreme subtlety? On the part of the Angelic Doctor the latter would not be in the least surprising.

<sup>25</sup> Craig, *Grace and Will*, 142. With regard to the ambiguity I have just referred to in Thomas Aquinas, Craig finds the Reformers “at least more consistent than Aquinas” (*ibid.*, 162, n. 3).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, n. 21; cf. 154.

<sup>27</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 329, n.5.

<sup>28</sup> This is also the thesis of *disputatio* 3 on the “Questionis XIX, Art. VI” added to Molina, *Concordia*, 283–88.

Calvinist view seems, in effect, to turn God into the devil."<sup>29</sup> It is regrettable that a theologian of Craig's stature should come to such a facile conclusion, one that appears so close to blasphemy.

How does middle knowledge reconcile foreknowledge and indeterminism? In that God knew (from all eternity) what a free agent *would* do in any given situation, God knows what he *will* do—without interfering in human choice—since he knows what will actually come to pass, and that depends on his decree. God saw/knew that Peter would deny him in the high priest's courtyard with the soldiers; he had decided to create a world in which this situation would come about. But how did he know what Peter or any other free agent would do? According to Molina, Craig tells us, it is because of the "super-comprehension" that God has of his creatures' will.<sup>30</sup> Molina waxes lyrical on this in a way he considers appropriate to the subject.

God understands, knows the determination of created free will before it exists, by the infinite and unlimited perfection of his intelligence, and by his supremely eminent understanding, in which free will is found on a level much more elevated than itself; therefore, God knows hypothetically, in this or that configuration of circumstances in which God wills to place it, toward which issue it will be freely inclined.<sup>31</sup>

Or again: "We affirm that the certainty of this middle knowledge accrues from the supremacy and the unlimited perfection of the divine intelligence by which it knows with certainty that which is in itself uncertain."<sup>32</sup> Minor variations on this linguistic theme are used repeatedly.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Molina insists on the biblical attestation for God's knowledge of the *counterfactuals* of freedom (as they are called today, meaning the choices that *would be* made if the conditions were to be present, though they never are and never will be). The two examples of this Molina quotes are God's reply to David in 1 Samuel 23:9–13 (if you stay in Keilah, the men of that town will surrender you to Saul) and Jesus's solemn words in Matthew 11:21–24 (if the mighty works done in Chorazin and Bethsaida had been done in Tyre and Sidon, those towns would have repented). Faced with such clear texts, to deny foreknowledge of future contingents linked to freedom would be folly (*insania*), a serious error as far as faith is concerned.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 243, disputatio 53, Membrum 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 261, disputatio 53, Membrum 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 208, disputatio 49; 223, disputatio 51; 230, disputatio 52 (mentions an "infinite interval" of superiority); 231, 237, disputatio 52 (also using the word *acumen*).

<sup>34</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 226–27, disputatio 52.

Suarez, in contrast to Molina (whom Craig prefers to follow),<sup>35</sup> in addition to extending middle knowledge to *divine* decisions, attempts to dispense with supercomprehension.<sup>36</sup> He bases his argument on the notion of bivalence: propositions of the counterfactuals of freedom are true or false; God already knew, before formulating his decree, all true propositions; he knew, therefore, the counterfactuals, the content of *scientia media*. Craig seems to lean in this direction, affirming that “God just knows every haecceity so intimately that He even knows when its exemplification would act out of character.”<sup>37</sup> On the subject of propositions, the advocates of middle knowledge try particularly hard to dismiss Edwards’s argument, which derives from the necessity of the past, this being unchangeable, and the necessity of a future that is known infallibly. Plantinga gets out of a sticky situation by appealing to Ockham. In considering facts of the past, it is important to differentiate between “hard and soft” facts. The latter are affected by future decisions: the prediction of a future event, which as a fact of the past, depends for its truth on the free choice that will be made.<sup>38</sup> Though somewhat critical, Craig goes along with Plantinga.<sup>39</sup> There is foreknowledge, since God knows all true propositions, but necessity does not stifle freedom, since the truth of propositions proceeds from independent free will.

Will opposition to Calvinism ever die down? To begin with, Suarez gave a new slant to middle knowledge that is different from Molina’s. Whereas the latter wanted above all to protect free will in speaking of foreknowledge, Suarez hangs on to the sovereignty of election and predestination despite the independence of free will. For him, God chooses those who will be saved, and *scientia media* enables him to bring about the situation in which the chosen will “freely” decide to believe. This situation includes aids to receiving grace, which are said to be *congruous*, that is, “adapted or fitting” to the person—according to what God knows by middle knowledge—so that the person will choose salvation. Hence the name “congruism” is given to this configuration. Suarez even goes against his own principles by admitting that God could *overcome* any opposition to the supposedly congruous

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<sup>35</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 275, 239.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 268. Haecceity, from the Latin *haecceitas*, from the demonstrative *haec*, “this,” is a concept introduced by Duns Scotus: he found that matter was not enough to (explain) individuation (in disagreement with Thomas Aquinas); haecceity ensures the identity of a particular individual as such.

<sup>38</sup> Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out,” particularly 271–72 for *hard facts*.

<sup>39</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 183–86. On 184 he criticizes the definition of temporal necessity in terms of the power of agents.

graces.<sup>40</sup> In that respect, he comes close to Augustinian thought! Recently some Calvinists have tended to look favorably on middle knowledge.<sup>41</sup> As “compatibilists” they are convinced that creaturely freedom is compatible with “determinism,” and so are anti-Molinistic, but they believe that they can highlight the wisdom of the plan of God better by bringing *scientia media* into the picture.

## II. A Brief Evaluation

Should middle knowledge be recognized as a *via media* or should it be exposed as a seductive blind alley?

If we are honest, we should admit how *attractive* the Molinist “solution” is. It above all seeks to protect free will; we must recognize that the notion of freedom in question seems clear to many, even to most, modern thinkers. It is spontaneously heartfelt. It comes “naturally” with the experience of decision-making (“Should I do this or that?). It is thought to free us from the monstrous and frightful suspicion that God could be the author of evil. And middle knowledge allows this to be done without requiring the negation of the traditional biblical understanding of foreknowledge. It brings answers to a question that Arminians ask in vain: How can God know in advance what is not determined? The way Suarez sees things honors the sovereignty of God’s choice. It seems almost too good to be true.

Our first comment concerns the notion of freedom. In that this is not a characteristic unique to Molinism (though it is a major component), it will suffice to mention the Augustinian refutation of Pelagian or Arminian points of view. The witness of Scripture sounds so loud that there would have to be collective deafness or acoustic hallucinations for it not to be heard! Scripture teaches unequivocally that the “natural” man is in bondage, incapable of receiving the things of God (1 Cor 2:14), that faith itself is a gift of God, who works in us both the *will* to do and the *ability* to do (Eph 2:8; Phil 2:12). Molina strenuously enters the exegetical contest, but without managing to convince. One example will suffice: when commenting on Romans 9:11, the verse that stresses that the decision to elect precedes any human act (Esau and Jacob), Molina can only say,

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<sup>40</sup> According to Craig, in *Grace and Will*, 160. This shows that Suarez is less attached to the indeterminism of free will than is Molina, even though his system defends it; that is maybe why he does not deny to God the middle knowledge of his own decisions.

<sup>41</sup> Their points of view are discussed by Laing, “The Compatibility,” 459, 463–67, and Campbell, “A Reformed Critique,” 18–19. Also called into question are Terrence Tiessen, Bruce A. Ware, and John S. Feinberg. Campbell even finds John Frame ambiguous (*ibid.*, 18, n. 44).

I admit that it [the decision] is not formed from foreknown works, but it was not so without foreknowledge of the works which would be accomplished by the free will of one or the other, according to the hypothetical arrangement of things, circumstances, and the aids [of grace].<sup>42</sup>

Quite apart from the biblical argument, this analysis of indeterministic notions of freedom highlights difficulties that have been pointed out long ago. Freedom without determination, called the freedom of indifference, becomes meaningless and is reduced to the absurd (e.g., Buridan’s ass). When it is absolutized in this way, no distinction of degrees or nuances can be made: Jean-Paul Sartre had the courage to face this outcome, which invariably comes up against the fact that universal experience contradicts it. We will return later to the subject of the determination of the will.

The fine-sounding terms used to extol the greatness of God cannot hide the *limitations* inflicted on God’s sovereignty. Molina attributes equal weight to divine will and human will (*partim, partim*), in a joint effort that puts them on the same level.<sup>43</sup> Craig, painstaking and frank as ever, declares that “God cannot annul the fact that if a free creature *were* to be placed in a certain set of circumstances, he *would* choose to do a certain act.”<sup>44</sup> The “counterfactuals” known through middle knowledge that do not depend on the divine will “serve to delimit the range of possible worlds to worlds feasible for God.”<sup>45</sup> Thus the concept of omnipotence needs some rethinking: “Not even the omnipotent God can simply decree which of these two counterfactuals is true.”<sup>46</sup> Does God thereby become passive in relation to his creatures? “Despite Molinist protests, I think we shall have to admit that this is true,”<sup>47</sup> says Craig, without seeing the problems involved.<sup>48</sup> The contrast with biblical teaching is striking! We need quote only two verses, which are often passed over, where we read that Saul died because of his unfaithfulness and because “the LORD put him to death” (1 Chr 10:13–14).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 267, disputatio 53, Membrum 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 200, disputatio 47.

<sup>44</sup> Craig, *Grace and Will*, 148.

<sup>45</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 122; cf. Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 239.

<sup>46</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 273.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 272. Diltz quotes another article by Craig, which brings out the limits the theory places on God (Diltz, “Divine Foreknowledge,” 24ff.).

<sup>48</sup> Francis Turretin’s fifth objection focuses on this aspect of doctrine (*Institutes* III.13.13): “This middle knowledge takes away the dominion of God over free acts because according to it the acts of the will are supposed to be antecedent to the decree and therefore have their futurity not from God, but from itself.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:215; *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 1:195.

<sup>49</sup> Highlighted by Diltz, “Divine Foreknowledge,” 23.

As far as the origin of evil is concerned, I have criticized elsewhere the attempt to solve the problem by appealing to independent freedom—which is a way of avoiding the humiliation of the “opaque mystery” that constitutes the absolute strangeness and uniqueness of evil.<sup>50</sup> The specific form that this solution takes on in the doctrine of middle knowledge is further weakened by maintaining foreknowledge. Paul Helm ventures a suggestion:

On the question of the authorship of evil, there’s not a hairsbreadth between the Augustinian-Calvinist perspective and Craig’s Molinism. According to Craig’s description of Molinism, “God decreed to create just those circumstances and just those people who would freely do what God willed to happen” (p. 134). While this description does not entail that God is the author of sin (any more than the Augustinian-Calvinist perspective does), it does entail that God decreed all sinful acts to happen and decreed them precisely as they have happened. If this is so, the God of Molina and Arminius seems to be as implicated in the fact of evil as much (or as little) as the God of the Augustinian-Calvinist perspective.<sup>51</sup>

In any case, the advantages for which middle knowledge prides itself melt away like snow in the sunshine.

Against the argument of Edwards, Craig protests that he “confuses certainty and necessity.”<sup>52</sup> The infallibility of the foreknowledge of free acts does not lead to “fatalism”—in Craig’s vocabulary, the term is used to stigmatize the Augustinian position.<sup>53</sup> On one point we can concede that Craig is right: to know something is not to bring it about. Calvin himself also agrees with this: “I will freely admit that foreknowledge alone imposes no necessity upon creatures, yet not all assent to this.”<sup>54</sup> But the question that Craig seems to pass over rather too quickly concerns what is presupposed by foreknowledge, and what it implies. He agrees that the truth of counterfactuals is borne out in how it corresponds with actual fact.<sup>55</sup> But what then is the reality grasped by middle knowledge (that  $X$ , in situation  $A$  would take decision  $a$ ,  $A \rightarrow a$ ,  $B \rightarrow b$ , or that Peter, in the court of the high priest, would deny Jesus) even before free will had even come into existence? Is being known not being determined? This difficulty constitutes the central debate between Molinists and their theological adversaries. Craig is well aware of it:

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<sup>50</sup> Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, trans. David G. Preston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 55–64, 128–30.

<sup>51</sup> Helm’s reply to Craig, *Four Views*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 127.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–31, and Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 162–71, and also the discussion that follows on Plantinga’s article.

<sup>54</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.6, as quoted in Paul Helm, “The Augustinian-Calvinist View,” *Four Views*, 184, n. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 259–60.

The most common objection urged against the truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom is the so-called grounding objection. The basic complaint here is that there is nothing to make such counterfactuals true (since they are supposed to be true logically prior to God's creative decree and even now are usually contrary-to-fact): but without a ground of their truth, they cannot be true.<sup>56</sup>

In other words: the supposed objects of middle knowledge have no title to existence before the divine decree, and the determination of a creatable indeterminate free will is a nonobject, therefore unknowable. Otherwise, there is a contradiction between the indeterminism affirmed in the creaturely choice and the determinism implied in *absolutely certain* foreknowledge. In the name of open theism, Boyd asks, rather pointedly, "How can we meaningfully say that agents could have done otherwise if all they shall ever do, and all they would have ever done in any possible world, is an unalterable fact an eternity before they even exist?"<sup>57</sup> Robert Reymond, a Calvinist, sums it up like this: "In sum, human indeterminism excludes divine middle knowledge" and refers to John Frame's bemused comment: "I cannot understand why so many . . . sophisticated philosophers have failed to see this point."<sup>58</sup>

The proper object of middle knowledge (if one even exists) has to be the *junction* between the hypothetical situation and the decision made by the free agent, between  $A$  and  $a$ , to make use of our symbols again ( $A \rightarrow a, B \rightarrow b$ , and so on). How can it be explained? The link is not effected by God, out of consideration for free will, and yet it is eternally certain that free will will embrace it, although free will does not yet exist even if God already knows it and can even inscribe it prophetically in time! What right do we have to assume or suppose this link? In affirming that  $a$  always follows  $A$ , would we not be introducing a kind of *necessity*, even a *natural* kind of necessity? Francis Turretin unmasked the fallacy of the example used by the Molinists, that God knows that should he decide to create fire it will produce heat ( $A$ : fire;  $a$ : heat): the natural agents are determined *ad unum* by their nature, but "the reason of natural agents determined in their nature to one thing is different from that of free agents, which can be inclined to one or the other of opposite things."<sup>59</sup>

The proponents of indeterminism need to be reminded of this! Craig would like the link ( $A \rightarrow a, B \rightarrow b$ , in my presentation) to be neither efficiently

<sup>56</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 140.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory A. Boyd's reply to Craig, *ibid.*, 146. Cf. 145: "It is metaphysically irrational." Campbell, "A Reformed Critique," 16, refers to William Hasker to support the view.

<sup>58</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 189, n. 51, for the reference to Frame.

<sup>59</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* III.13.22; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:218.

caused nor a question of chance,<sup>60</sup> but isn't this a pipe dream? He unintentionally admits that a purely naturalistic, immanent, and contingent analysis of freedom gets "fatally" bogged down *either* in the *determinism* of causal series (causal conditions and motives) that asphyxiates liberty even if it explains choice exhaustively by allowing it to be predicted infallibly *or* in *chance* as the final condition, which strikes him as untenable. *Either A* gives *a* as cause leads to effect, and then what becomes of freedom? *Or alternatively A* does not give *a*, and anything can happen, as everything is subject to chance. Craig would like to escape this dilemma, but in created nature, there is not a third category. Turretin, on the other hand, had the insight that only the transcendence of divine determination affords escape from the fatal antinomy (which is not far from Cornelius Van Til's position in his transcendental criticism of apostate thought)<sup>61</sup> and that this is the only way to avoid the dilemma. This unique determination, which is more innate than the most intimate aspect of freedom, transcends determinism and makes for freedom—a protection against blind fate. This determination does not precede the divine will but is consequent on it carrying out God's plan; it is, therefore, incompatible with middle knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Molina attributes considerable importance to biblical evidence found in 1 Samuel 23 and Matthew 11: God knows the choices that would be made by free agents in hypothetical situations which will never actually come about. He accuses his adversaries of "weakening and overturning [*enervare et evertere*] openly the words of Christ."<sup>63</sup> But this argument has feet of clay. On the one hand, the texts quoted can be understood differently: God's answer to David is speaking about dispositions that are already settled and a resolution that has already been taken by the people of Keilah, and the condemnation

<sup>60</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 262.

<sup>61</sup> Cf., e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969).

<sup>62</sup> It seems to me that Reformed theologians drawn to middle knowledge are deficient in this sense of transcendence. Their compatibilism finds its justification mainly in the link between freedom and the person as a whole, with all the possibilities of causality that this includes; they speak about determinism. It would seem they fail to see that the blend of earthly factors, however accommodating and subtle they choose to think it might be, makes freedom into an illusion if it determines this freedom to a single choice, infallibly. This amounts to (a form of) mechanism, even if it is very finely tuned and complex. Freedom transcends all these factors taken together and does so by the transcendence of the divine working that informs and generates it, in which human beings have life, movement, and being. Because of the naturalistic connotations of the word *determinism*, I prefer to avoid it in this context and speak of divine, even theological, "determination." Along with G. C. Berkouwer, I would not willingly opt for "determinism or indeterminism." G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, trans. Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 158.

<sup>63</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 249, disputatio 53, Membrum 2.

of Chorazin and Bethsaida is “a hyperbolic and proverbial kind of speech.”<sup>64</sup> Above all, nothing would permit this knowledge to be attributed to an earlier stage of the decree! God may predict the conditions of any given hypothetical situation because he knows that he determines it to be so!

It is possible for God to have included in his decree enough of the characteristics of the agents involved to give meaning to the counterfactual propositions concerning them. God knows both what the disposition of heart of the people of Tyre might be and how he would intervene from within this situation, should he decide to work miracles in their midst. The originality of Molinism is not that it attributes to God the knowledge of these counterfactuals, but that it places this knowledge *before* the exercise of divine will (*middle* knowledge).<sup>65</sup> Craig admits quite frankly, “It would be very difficult to demonstrate this [the Molinist thesis] directly either biblically or philosophically” and renders to Diego Alvarez what belongs to Diego Alvarez: this Dominican discerned that the real divergence concerns the relation to the decree, whether it be before or after.<sup>66</sup> In fact, only Augustinian-Calvinists can explain the knowledge of counterfactuals on the basis of the divine decree, whereas if Molinists want to do so, they are obliged to contradict their indeterminism!

Molina appeals to God’s divine supercomprehension and his infinite intelligence to explain the existence of middle knowledge. Not a word, however, is said about the *how*. Turretin saw the deficiency of this reference: “But how could infirmity of knowledge change the nature of things and see a thing as certainly to take place which is contingent?”<sup>67</sup> There is a time and a place for bowing before the mystery, but also many instances when the appeal to supposed mystery is a way of avoiding the issue. Molina accuses his adversaries, even Cajetan himself, of falling into the latter case and taking refuge there in an unworthy manner.<sup>68</sup> This criticism seems to have a boomerang effect.

Ah, but isn’t God outside of time? In his eternity there is neither past nor future: in considering everything as present, he sees the choices that his creatures will make; future contingents are simply not future for him. This is how some minds (second-class ones, I am afraid) think they can solve the problem. Molina shows a prudent reserve regarding this, something

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<sup>64</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* III.13.16; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:217; cf. *Institutes* III.13.15 dealing with 1 Sam 23 and III.13.16–17 with other passages.

<sup>65</sup> Freddoso underlines this clearly; see his Introduction to *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 242.

<sup>67</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* III.13.12; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:215.

<sup>68</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 253, disputatio 53, Membrum 2.

we should respect. Admittedly, he went along with his contemporaries in accepting the notion of the “pure present” of eternity, a notion we owe to Boethius, through whom the philosophical heritage of antiquity was transmitted to the Middle Ages. However, he distinguished the knowledge of future contingents *in their causes* and so avoided founding middle knowledge on the “presentness” of future contingents.<sup>69</sup>

Craig rejects the idea that future events already exist, as it raises “insuperable philosophical and theological objections.”<sup>70</sup> He advocates a conception of time that he calls “tensed,” as this preserves the ultimate validity of the succession of events.<sup>71</sup> To compare God contemplating the future to a tourist on the Eiffel Tower seeing cars advancing toward a crossroads before they reach it falsely spacializes time. To deny that succession (i.e., *before* and *after*) is real for God, if God is the measure of truth, relegates God to an *illusion* of the creature: what would remain of the meaning of human decision then? Here again, we appreciate Turretin’s firmness: we cannot base middle knowledge on “the eternal existence of things by which they are said to be present to God; but since they could have no real being (*but only an intentional*) from eternity, they cannot be said to have existed from eternity otherwise than by reason of the decree in which they obtain their futurition.”<sup>72</sup>

Suarez, whom Craig seems to follow, prefers to base his argument on God’s knowledge of *all* truths (even before his decree), including among these propositions concerning human choices in (hypothetical) situations, from *a* to *A*, *b* to *B*. But are they in fact among them? To the extent that Craig recognizes that truth depends on correlation with reality (in all possible worlds), the question inevitably arises. If the validity of the temporal succession is given, why not recognize that the truth of propositions concerning future free choice, according to the reality of time, remains *suspended* until the choice is actually made? They are *not yet* true propositions.<sup>73</sup> The only way they can become actual truths is if indeterminism is renounced, and they are made to depend (whether they be factual or counterfactual) on God’s decree: then there is no doubt that God knows them. Suarez brings logic into play by *detaching* it from the reality involved; it could be that at this point there is affinity with twentieth-century analytical philosophy!

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., particularly 205–7, *disputationis* 48 and 49.

<sup>70</sup> Craig, *Four Views*, 133.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., and Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 226–27.

<sup>72</sup> Turretin (*Institutes* III.13.12) refers to Thomas, *Summa* I.14.13; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:215 (emphasis added).

<sup>73</sup> In this connection, the distinction between “soft and hard” past facts fails to convince me. Facts from the past—X predicted that S would do *a* in the future—are not modified when S makes a decision; the only thing to change is the unchangeable fact.

Molina and Craig claim that middle knowledge allows for divine deliberation, and so for the wisdom of his plan (or decree).<sup>74</sup> The appeal of this thought resides in the analogy with human ways of planning: in drawing up a plan, a strategist takes into account the foreseeable reactions of his adversaries and partners and conceivable situations. But, precisely, this thought presupposes that God, like a human strategist, is dealing with agents that he is not determining and that their very freedom limits his own action: he has to come to terms *with* them to draw up his plan. Such indeterminism seems indefensible. Without showing the workings of his decision, without subtly toying with the “opaque mystery,” we need simply to admire the wisdom of God in the glory of what he is, beheld in the mirror of his plan.

The difference of opinion on indeterminism, and on what makes for created freedom, cannot be avoided. In Molina and those who follow him I perceive a true and valuable insight: freedom is indeed incompatible with natural determinism. A programming akin to animal instincts would do away with it.<sup>75</sup> If worldly forces (including psychological ones) acting on me are effective to the point that my behavior can be predicted infallibly, then I am no longer free, and I am no longer responsible. The tragic misunderstanding arises when what is true of worldly powers is extended to the relation between man and God, an absolutely unique and foundational relation. Helm made this clear: “God’s relation to the universe that he has created and that he sustains and directs is a relation without parallel. It is unique, incomparable, *sui generis*.”<sup>76</sup>

Craig’s response is so astounding it almost beggars belief: “I see no reason to think that God’s relations to creation are unparalleled and incomprehensible.”<sup>77</sup> The blind spot is illuminating! Paul Wells recalls Herman Bavinck’s evaluation of the claim to autonomy: it is deeply *irreligious*.<sup>78</sup> This implies no slur on the personal piety of non-Calvinist theologians, of course: Bavinck was talking about the underlying “motive” of theological formulation. He thought of religion as being respectful awe of the divine, a numinous sensitivity, a joyous trembling, the whole being bowing before the most-high and the most-holy God. He was also talking about the role

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<sup>74</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 208–9, disputatio 49; 244, disputatio 53, Membrum 1; Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 243–44; cf. Craig, *Grace and Will*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, 196, disputatio 47, on the origin of contingency.

<sup>76</sup> Helm, “The Augustinian-Calvinist View,” 167, cf. 168 and 178–79. He warns against assimilating divine determination to “intramundane models of causation, and particularly to general physical determinism” (180).

<sup>77</sup> Craig’s reply to Helm, *ibid.*, 202.

<sup>78</sup> Wells, “L’*élection*,” 32.

of theological formulation in doctrinal construction. Without such a fear of the Lord, there can be no sound theology.

### **III. *Seduction as an Occasion for Reflection***

The doctrine of middle knowledge supposes as its object a blend of indeterminism and determinism; those who promote it do not explain its constitution; their defense of free will comes from conferring on God a logic valid only for his creatures. How can such minds, some of which are far from being mediocre (the ability of Craig and Molina is not being called into question), have let themselves be led astray? No doubt this comes partly from the *desire* to be in tune with an idea of freedom held passionately by the current majority opinion, but apart from that? We should learn a few lessons from this phenomenon.

Humility can be advantageous! The example of the Molinists gives us a fair warning: well-known theologians who reason so correctly on many issues can also swallow huge errors without noticing their inconsistency. Having observed this in other theologians (for example, in the articulate work of Wolfhart Pannenberg), I desire to take the admonition for myself.

When the subject of the infinite comes up, as in Molina's work, it is easy to slip off course. It is a legitimate subject, although Scripture is surprisingly discreet (the contrast with later Judaism should serve as a warning). Blaise Pascal was genius enough to handle it well, at least as far as the essential is concerned. But it is a heady subject, and it makes heads spin. It can rob us of discernment. It is so easy to end up saying anything and everything on the subject. That should make us doubly careful.

Another factor weighs particularly heavily in the balance: the very quantity of material and the technicality of the debate. The inordinate reasoning of Molina or Craig, which is sometimes complex, *anesthetizes* the ability to discern truth from falsehood (Phil 1:9 uses the word *aisthēsis* for "discernment"). In reading volumes full of complicated reasoning, the reader's energy is exhausted by the effort of understanding, and there is none left for resisting! An author inspires respect and is held in high repute when his writing is laced with refined scholarship; even if the reader feels the slightest doubt, he dares neither voice it nor even think it. That is why it often takes several decades for new theories to be assessed adequately. Only then do their catastrophic weaknesses become evident: no one had dared to see that "the emperor has no clothes"! Overelaboration and academic complication are not generally used intentionally to pull the wool over the public's eyes:

the author himself would be the first victim, being responsible for upholding an untenable idea at the heart of his development.

Finally, the category of the *possible* is not negligible and should not be neglected. Scripture permits its usage, and no one can do without it. It is when it is handled in a noncritical way, as if its meaning and its importance were not to be called into question, that we should be wary. The distinction between the divided sense (*sensu diviso*) and the composite sense (*sensu composito*) is relevant to my question, but the authors go no further. When even tradition affirms that God knows all the possibles, what is their status? Are they “something” with a certain degree of existence? Monotheism excludes the possibility of making possibles into a sort of reality (a kind of environment) or an eternal counterpart to God. I am rather disconcerted by the assurance with which analytical philosophers play with “possible worlds.” Craig is bold enough to write, “But the Molinist is under no obligation to accept the currently fashionable possible worlds account.”<sup>79</sup> But he goes no further, and that flash of lucidity does not make the horizon clearer. The idea will have to be examined in greater depth and with closer attention—but that is another story, or rather another research project.

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<sup>79</sup> Craig, *Foreknowledge and Freedom*, 256; cf. 263–67.