

MOLINISM, OPEN THEISM, AND MORAL LUCK

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Libertarian theists are forced to grapple with the problem of divine foreknowledge. Among the most salient options available to them are Molinism, on which God has pre-volitional knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom, and open theism, on which God's knowledge is severely restricted—not only lacking in knowledge of true counterfactuals of freedom (all of which open theists typically deny to be true at all), but also in knowledge of future free actions in the actual world.¹

The choice between them is sometimes presented as a trade-off between competing values. On Molinism, God has providential power over the history of the world, but acquires it only at the cost of flirting with something close to theological determinism—God has the ability, in an indirect way, to manipulate my behavior by manipulating the circumstances in which I am placed.² And insofar as God's judgment of me is contingent upon some aspect of my behavior, God thus has the ability, in an indirect way, to control that in virtue of which I will be judged. On open theism, this ability is denied, but so is God's providential control. To put it (very) crudely, Molinism wrests control from human beings and gives it to God, while open theism wrests control from God and gives it to human beings.

In this paper, I argue that this picture is mistaken. I think the Molinist can have her cake and eat it, too—she can grant that God has providential control *and* claim that human beings have *more* control over that in virtue of which God judges us than they would have had on open

¹ Of course, there are intermediate positions on which God has no knowledge of the truth-value of counterfactuals of freedom (with false antecedents) but has knowledge of the actual future. However, since Molinism and open theism represent the extreme positions in the field, the contrast between them is both striking and instructive.

² Despite the fact that, on Molinism, God can't control what I would freely do in those circumstances.

theism. This can be seen by the different ways in which open theists and Molinists may respond to the problem of moral luck.

(But first, a simplifying assumption: I assume here that God's judgment of us is determined by our moral profile. This assumption isn't essential—if "salvation is by faith alone," then the motivation for my thesis would flow equally well from, say, a parallel problem of fideistic luck.)

I. The Problem and the Open Theist's Reply

Nagel's seminal writing on moral luck includes (or inspires) examples like these:

- A. Resultant luck: Two men attempt murder by shooting, but only one attempt succeeds—the other fails due to the unexpected intervention of a passing bird (61).
- B. Constitutive luck: One man is an utter moral monster due to rampant abuse suffered as a child, while another, whose parents were model citizens, is a picture of pure virtue.
- C. Circumstantial luck: A perfectly harmless German émigré to Argentina would have been a Nazi officer if his family hadn't left Germany while he was young (58-59).

In each case, Nagel says, our moral evaluation of the agent will turn on luck—i.e., on facts beyond the agent's control. Perhaps he is right. But libertarian theists, at any rate, certainly hope that *God's* evaluation of the agent won't turn on facts beyond her control. But what *does* it turn on?

I expect that the open theist's response will be something like this:

- (a) Surely, God would not judge us on the presence or absence of a passing bird—the outcomes of the agent's behavior aren't what matters, but rather, the act of agency itself.

(So we needn't worry about resultant luck.) (b) And when it comes to evaluating the act itself, what matters is what you do with what you're given—from those who have been given much (e.g., virtuous dispositions instilled by virtuous parents), much will be expected, and from those who have been given little (e.g., nasty dispositions instilled by abusive parents), little will be expected. (So this mitigates the force of constitutive luck.) (c) Finally, there's no sense in talking about what someone would have freely done had she been in different circumstances—quite simply, no counterfactual assertions of that sort are true.³ (So Nagel's example of circumstantial luck is incoherent). All God has to go by is what the agent does in the actual world, and the effects of luck in the actual world may be neutralized in God's evaluation of the agent along the lines mentioned in (b).

How shall we evaluate this reply?

I am happy to grant point (a) and ignore resultant luck for the rest of the paper. But I have severe doubts about the efficacy of (b) and (c).

First, note that circumstantial and constitutive luck, although distinguished by Nagel, can without confusion be treated as a single kind of luck—a more general kind of circumstantial luck. Let's say that, for any set of circumstances C, C includes the atom-for-atom arrangement of the world and the laws of nature, insofar as they participate in inclining forces on the agent.⁴ Then C will include facts about what morally relevant actions are open to the agent (e.g., whether she has the opportunity to enlist in the Nazi army) and also facts about the agent's constitution (e.g.,

³ Some open theists might grant that there are true counterfactuals of freedom, but deny that those propositions are knowable by God. For our purposes, there is no pragmatic difference between denying that there are true counterfactuals of freedom and saying that their truth-value is unknowable by God—on both views, they are off limits when it comes to God's evaluation of us. For brevity's sake, I will just assume that open theists deny that there are true counterfactuals of freedom.

⁴ This is a stipulation about how I intend to use the expression “set of circumstances C,” not a substantive claim. Libertarians, at any rate (to whom Molinism and open theism may be live options), ought to be on board with this way of speaking.

whether or not she has nasty dispositions). The trouble with luck exemplified in cases (B) and (C) is that one's being in C is (often) beyond one's control, but that one's being in C nevertheless appears to play a role in determining one's moral profile.

Now, let's take a closer look at the open theist's strategy for addressing this problem. The agent's moral profile is determined by her behavior in just the actual world, but—according to (b)—it is sensitive to the difficulty involved in what she does, the resources given to her, etc. Call this the agent's "Behavior-Difficulty Index" (or "BDI"). In the spirit of Kant, we might guess that the moral monster in example (B) who struggles to do some small moral good has a higher BDI than the model citizen who does great moral good with ease. At any rate, there would be no absurdity in supposing so, and God, we may justifiably assume, is capable of measuring an agent's BDI with perfect accuracy. So, the open theist's response above is that the agent's moral profile is determined by her BDI in just the actual world, and that this is enough to neutralize the effects of luck on the agent's moral profile.

But note that the agent's BDI varies wildly from world to world. It does so in two ways. First (given libertarianism), there are worlds in which the agent's BDI differs from her actual BDI due to different choices that the agent makes in some C in which the agent is also placed in the actual world. (So, there are worlds in which I freely chose to murder my wife last night after coming home.) Call this "Type-A variance". Second, there are worlds in which the agent's BDI differs from her actual BDI due to choices that the agent makes in some C* in which the agent is *not* placed in the actual world. (So, there are worlds in which I have to make some morally relevant decision while being chased by the Yakuza, a decision which alters my BDI.)⁵ Call this "Type-B variance".⁶ Type-A variance poses no problem for us, since this kind of variance is not

⁵ Note: I have not been, am not being, and (I trust) never will be chased by the Yakuza.

⁶ To complicate matters, there are worlds that suffer from both Type-A and Type-B variance. And there are worlds in which the different choices that the agent makes "cancel each other out" so that her BDI isn't altered from what it is in the actual world. Nothing is lost in the present discussion by ignoring these complications.

a matter of luck. (Put another way, we *make* worlds with Type-A variance non-actual through our free actions.) The problem is with Type-B variance. Since we don't (always) control the circumstances in which we are placed, and since our BDI varies in worlds in which we are placed in different circumstances, the concern is that we don't have a sufficient degree of control over our BDI, and hence, over our moral profile.

The open theist's response to this worry is expressed by (c) above. Let C* be some non-actual set of circumstances (i.e., some set of circumstances in which the agent is not placed in the actual world). According to the open theist, the following claim is not true:

1. Had C* been actual, the agent's moral profile would have been different.

(1) is not true on open theism because there is no true counterfactual of freedom pertaining to what the agent would have freely done in C*, and so there is no true counterfactual pertaining to what the agent's BDI, and hence, moral profile, would have looked like had C* been actual. So, any claim asserting that her moral profile would have been different if she were placed in C* is not true. So, while there is Type-B variance across possible worlds, it's an error to say that there *would have been* Type-B variance had the agent been placed in different sets of circumstances. And at first glance, this might seem sufficient for protecting the agent's moral profile from luck.

But this first glance is too superficial. For it follows from open theism that the following claim *also* is not true:

2. Had C* been actual, the agent's moral profile would have been the same.

After all, if there is no true counterfactual of freedom pertaining to what the agent would have freely done in C*, then any claim that she would have acted in a way that would *not* alter her BDI (and hence, moral profile) is not true. So, not only is there Type-B variance across possible worlds, but it's an error to say that there *would not have been* Type-B variance had the agent been

placed in different sets of circumstances. So, we seem to be in a ticklish position. How are we to evaluate it?

Here's how. Since the agent's being in C is often something over which she has no control, the crucial question is *whether or not her being in C plays an ineliminable role in determining her moral profile*. If it does, then the open theist is impugned by the problem of moral luck. But now it should be clear that the mere fact that (1) is not true and (C) is incoherent on open theism is a red herring. On open theism, an agent's moral profile is determined exclusively by facts about the actual world—including the circumstances in which the agent acts. (After all, the circumstances in which the agent acts play a crucial role when factoring in the difficulty, etc. of the agent's behavior—the “D” in the agent's BDI.) The fact that, on open theism, (2) isn't true demonstrates that open theism has no way of inoculating her moral profile against the luck involved in the obtaining of C. It appears, then, that C *does* play an ineliminable role in determining her moral profile—and so open theism falls afoul of the problem of moral luck.

II. The Molinist's Reply

The Molinist, on the other hand, has a way of asserting both that (1) is false *and* that (2) is true, thus protecting the agent's moral profile from luck. All the Molinist needs to do is to adopt a standard solution to the problem of moral luck—or, at any rate, a particular version of that solution.

Michael Zimmerman and John Greco have each promoted a solution to the problem on which an agent's moral profile is determined not just by her actual moral record (or her actual BDI), but by a subset of the sum total of her moral behavior across worlds. What matters, they say, is not just what you in fact do in the circumstances you inherit, but also what you *would* do in all the different circumstances you could possibly inherit. The solution has an immediate

intuitive appeal. “Are you really a better person than Joe Shmo?” one might ask, pointing at some convicted criminal. “Well, how would *you* have acted had you been in Joe’s shoes?” The question seems to be precisely the one we should be asking, the answer to which appears to play a crucial role in determining your moral profile.

Of course, the Molinist (but not the open theist) holds that there’s a fact of the matter regarding what you would do in all those different circumstances. All the Molinist needs to do is to add a dash of libertarianism—in particular, the claim that all (actual or counterfactual) behavior relevant for assessing the agent’s moral profile is libertarianly free behavior—and a second claim. The second claim is that, for any non-actual C^* in which the agent can be placed, were the agent to be placed in C^* , the truth-value of every counterfactual of freedom in which the agent participates would be the same as it is in the actual world. Both of these claims are already required by Molinism, and so they represent no additional burden that the Molinist needs to shoulder.⁷

The results are just what we were hoping for. My moral profile in the actual world is determined, not just by what I freely do in the actual world, but by what I would freely do for any set of circumstances in which I could be placed—i.e., by the facts asserted by true counterfactuals of freedom about me. In other words, it’s not just my actual BDI which is relevant. My moral profile is determined also by my BDI in all of the worlds to which those true counterfactuals of freedom correspond—my BDI in all of the worlds in which I exist and which God can actualize. Further, had God actualized some *other* world, had I been placed in *other* circumstances, the very same counterfactuals of freedom would have been true of me (according to the second claim

⁷ The second claim is made by Plantinga (“Reply to Robert Adams” 376) and Freddoso in response to Adams’ and Kenny’s argument that counterfactuals of freedom are not possibly knowable prior to God’s act of creation, since which counterfactuals are true turns on which world is the actual world, which in turn depends on what God creates. The reply—that God (so to speak) “inherits” the truth-value of every counterfactual of freedom prior to creation and can do nothing about it, regardless of what he creates—is the only available response.

above). So, had I been placed in some other set of circumstances, my moral profile would have remained the same. So, not only can the Molinist assert the falsity of

1. Had C* been actual, the agent's moral profile would have been different.

The Molinist can also assert the *truth* of

2. Had C* been actual, the agent's moral profile would have been the same.

And that is the result we needed.

The Molinist, of course, doesn't deny that there is Type-B variance in an agent's BDI across worlds. For that matter, she has no way of denying that there *would have been* Type-B variance had the agent been placed in different circumstances. (Suppose—to pick a number out of the blue—your actual BDI is 0.72. Would your BDI have been 0.72 had you been raised among the Bushmen of the Kalihari Desert?⁸ To claim that it would have been is to make a wildly unsupported statement of faith.) But Type-B variance isn't the problem for the Molinist that it was for the open theist, for (on the Molinist suggestion I have offered) the agent's moral profile isn't determined by her BDI at just one world. So, an agent's BDI may (Type-B) vary among multiple worlds without her moral profile also varying among those worlds. That is the key to the solution to the problem, as articulated in the last paragraph. And since the open theist rejects counterfactuals of freedom, and so is forced to confine the agent's moral profile to her BDI at just one world (the actual world), this solution is unavailable to her. The Molinist, then, can succeed in addressing the problem of moral luck, while the open theist cannot.

III. Conclusion

I conclude that the original picture with which we began is mistaken. On Molinism, God can make use of the counterfactuals of freedom in the creation decision in order indirectly to

⁸ Note: I am assuming that the reader was not raised among the Bushmen of the Kalihari Desert.

manipulate the course of events. So, God exercises providential control over the course of history. But on the Molinist alternative I offered, God has *no* control over my moral profile. Further, my moral profile isn't subject to *anything* other than myself—the truth-value of the counterfactuals of freedom about me doesn't turn on the satisfaction of their antecedents, i.e., upon my actually being in some C.⁹ Of course, it's also true that, on *open theism*, God does not have the ability (completely) to manipulate my moral profile.¹⁰ Nevertheless, on open theism, my moral profile *is* subject to facts beyond my control, i.e., the obtaining of C. So, the Molinist may correctly claim that her position gives human beings *more* control over that in virtue of which God judges us than does open theism.¹¹

Of course, none of this makes Molinism *true*. For it to be true, there would have to be true counterfactuals of freedom, knowable pre-volitionally by God, and many philosophers are unwilling to admit that there are such things. But we should abandon talk of the choice between Molinism and open theism as being a trade-off between the “competing” values of divine providence and human control. When it comes to which is the more *attractive* choice, the advantages slide in the Molinist's favor.¹²

⁹ No Molinist that I am aware of has claimed that we *make true* the true counterfactuals of freedom about us which have false antecedents. But the facts that they assert are facts about us—about our (counterfactual) exercise of libertarian freedom. So, while we don't strictly *make true* the vast majority of true counterfactuals of freedom, their truth is, in the sense that matters, up to us. Their truth certainly isn't up to anything (or anyone) *else*.

¹⁰ However, there is some *mitigated* sense in which, on open theism, God may influence my moral profile, for there is some mitigated sense in which God controls the fact that I am in C (although my being in C is also subject, presumably, to the consequences of others' free acts).

¹¹ As noted before, I am fairly confident that the result will be the same even if God's judgment of us is in virtue of some feature other than our moral profile—e.g., our faith. A parallel problem of fideistic luck can be constructed, whereby it is shown that agents often have no control over whether they have the opportunity for faith, or the ease with which they can have faith. A parallel solution is also forthcoming: our fideistic profile might turn not only on our faith in the actual world, but how our faith would have turned out had we been placed in other circumstances. (Naturally, I'm assuming that the faith that matters is the product of libertarian action.)

¹² There may be another theological advantage to the Molinist solution to the problem of moral luck that I have just offered: perhaps it affords a novel way to make sense of original sin. Those who, to all appearances, *actually* do no wrong may nevertheless have a “sinful” moral profile.

One might think, on the other hand, that the Molinist suggestion I've offered carries a severe theological *cost*, in that it undermines the free will defense (which, of course, is the very purpose to which

it was put when reintroduced to contemporary philosophical consciousness by Alvin Plantinga (...*Necessity* 164-96)). If God has all the evidence he needs to assess an agent's moral profile pre-volitionally, then he has no need to grant us the power to freely cause harm in order to judge us justifiably. This concern about the free will defense has merit, however, only if a highly implausible assumption is true, namely, that the only justifying value of libertarian freedom is the license it confers on God to judge us. Surely this is false, and so I doubt that my suggestion undermines the free will defense.

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