

Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge?

Paul Helm and Terrance L. Tiessen

Tiessen: “No, but . . .”

I am grateful to Paul Helm for his very helpful comments on my article in *Westminster Theological Journal*.¹ He has identified some places where I did not state myself clearly as well as some matters concerning which I now believe it wise to revise my earlier position. At other places, I welcome further discussion because I remain convinced that my proposal has something useful to offer a Reformed theological understanding of God’s providential work.

God’s knowledge of “could” and “would”: necessary or middle?

I had posited that the distinction between God’s necessary knowledge and his middle knowledge is a distinction between his knowledge of “everything that *could* be,” that is, of “all possible worlds” and his knowledge of “what creatures *would* do in particular circumstances, which may or may not ever occur, depending on which of the many possible worlds God decides to actualize.”² Helm complains that I have not explained why the difference between these is significant and he doubts “whether there is any distinct category of what *would* be as against what *could* be that could (or would) form the basis of a category of divine middle knowledge of a Calvinist kind.”

I have defended divine middle knowledge for a few years now but since at least 2005 I have been pondering the possibility that God knows counterfactuals of soft-

¹ Tiessen, “Why Calvinists Should Believe.”

² *Ibid.*, 347.

determinist freedom as an aspect of his necessary knowledge.³ When I wrote my article for *WTJ* in 2007, I still saw value in distinguishing a “middle” knowledge, but even then I stated that “it is more important to me to reach agreement among Calvinists that God makes significant use of his knowledge of counterfactual (or true hypothetical events) than it is to reach agreement about *when*, logically, God has this knowledge.”⁴ Reflection on Professor Helm’s recent comments has finally brought me to the conclusion that he is correct on this point. God’s knowledge of counterfactuals is not different from his knowledge of possibilities; it is therefore part of his necessary knowledge.⁵ My *WTJ* article would better have been entitled: “Why Calvinists Should Affirm God’s Deliberate

³ In an email message to John Frame on January 12, 2005, after we had discussed this issue in a brief exchange, I wrote: “I have come to see that the concept of MK, as such, is not as essential to my model as it is to the Molinist model because of my rejection of libertarian freedom. . . . I still see God’s knowledge of counterfactuals as important in this construct. But, I am now less sure that it matters whether he knows this as part of his essential knowledge or, distinctively, as part of a logically (and perhaps not completely non-chronologically) separate ‘moment’ or act of knowing.”

⁴ Tiessen, “Why Calvinists Should Believe,” 346.

⁵ Of course, this means that I was wrong to reject David Werther’s case for including counterfactuals of compatibilist freedom in God’s necessary knowledge (“Why Calvinists Should Believe,” 354-56) and that I now agree with the perspective I quoted from John Frame (*Doctrine of God*, 502-3; cited in “Why Calvinists Should Believe,” 354 n 32).

Use of His Knowledge of Counterfactuals in His Wise Decree, Although They Reject Molinism.”

As I change my mind, I have naturally wondered why I took what I now view as an unhelpful turn. As I reflect upon my earlier error, two contributing factors come to mind. First, it is possible that I blurred the difference between divine and human knowledge. If we wish to predict and to influence another person’s behavior, it is much more useful to know with certainty what that person would do in a particular set of circumstances than to know what they could (or might) do. But one of the great differences between God and us human beings is that, however well we know another person, we never know them well enough to predict with certainty exactly how they will act. They are capable of surprising us. Such is not the case for our omniscient God. He knows people completely, understands circumstances exhaustively and, because God has given moral creatures the freedom of spontaneity (rather than libertarian freedom), he knows exactly what a particular sort of person would do in each hypothetical set of circumstances. Thus, the difference that exists in our human experience, between what we deem it possible for a person to do and what they will do, is a problem caused by imperfect knowledge not a matter of different kinds of knowledge.

Given the difference between God’s knowledge and ours, it is clear that there is an important difference between *our* knowing what a person could (that is, might) do and God’s knowing what that person *would* do. I erred seriously, therefore, in proposing that there is a difference between *God’s* knowledge of what people could and what they

would do. This is because God has not made moral creatures libertarianly free; they do not have the power of contrary choice.⁶

I consider God's knowledge of counterfactuals to be very helpful in our understanding of the compatibility between God's meticulous sovereignty and morally responsible creaturely freedom. Assuming the validity of the grounding objection to

⁶ I am aware that Helm believes the nature of human freedom to be a matter not revealed to us by Scripture (in Bruce Ware, ed. *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008], 50), and that he thinks theologians who endorse without qualification a philosophical position on this issue make their theology "hostages to fortune" (*Perspectives*, 126). This is a serious concern and I do not take it lightly. At this point, however, I am greatly impressed by the explanatory usefulness of the concept of soft-determinist freedom in understand Scripture's teaching. It is very clear to me that God is meticulously sovereign and equally clear that certain of God's creatures (angels and humans) are morally responsible. I find the compatibilist account offered by Jonathan Edwards, and widely appropriated by later Calvinists, very persuasive. If am wrong about this, however, the effect of the error would be much more far reaching in its effects upon my theology than the concession that God does not have middle knowledge. Indeed, I would be left with much less to say of an explanatory nature and more appeal to mystery. My doctrine of divine providence would become apophatic. Furthermore, much of the construction in the other models of providence described in my book *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* [Downers Grove, IL.: Intervarsity Press, 2000] would have to be dismissed as unjustified speculation.

Molinism, if creatures were libertarianly free, the most that even God could know is the probability that a creature would act in a particular way; he could not know with certainty how they would act. Having that certain knowledge of how any moral creature would act in a set of circumstances is what enables God to decree a world history in which his will is always done, even though his creatures act as they choose.

The second factor that probably contributed to my error was the fact that it was from Molinists that I learned to appreciate the usefulness to God of his knowledge of counterfactuals. For some time, I have been acting on the belief that these advantages went with middle knowledge but that the Molinist construction needed to be revised to remove their error concerning the nature of creaturely freedom. I believed that compatibilist middle knowledge was the way to preserve what they had. What I had failed to see, during that time, was that the sole rationale for positing middle knowledge is to give room for libertarian creaturely freedom as a fact of the world God chooses to actualize. I now believe that rejection of the Molinist construction because of its faulty understanding of freedom also entails rejection of the concept of divine middle knowledge. If (as I believe) creatures are not libertarianly free, there can be no difference between *God's* knowledge of what creatures could do and what they would do, that is, what "A would do in C," as Helm put it, and God knows this important truth necessarily.

Despite the claim in the title of my article, that Calvinists should reject Molinism, it is now obvious to me that I described the situation as Molinists would see it. For them a distinction *does* exist between what people could and what they would do. This is because they believe that, for creatures to act with genuine (morally responsible)

freedom, they must have the power of contrary choice. From their perspective, A *could* act in more than one way, in circumstances C. What A *would* do is therefore the product of an act of will on A's part which is not determined by who A is. It would not suffice for God to know the nature of all possible creatures, he would also have to know their free choices in all possible worlds.

As Helm has rightly discerned, no distinction exists between what A *could* do and what A *would* do, in circumstances C, if soft-determinism pertains so that A has the freedom of spontaneity but not of contrary choice. Helm is also correct in his observation that my attempt to differentiate between God's (necessary) knowledge of possibilities as abstract and God's (middle) knowledge of counterfactuals as specific is invalid and fails to take into account adequately the traditional Reformed understanding of what God knows necessarily.

Effects of the rejection of middle knowledge upon my model of providence

Thankfully, conceding that God knows counterfactuals as part of his necessary knowledge (rather than as a middle knowledge) has virtually no effect on my account of divine providence. What has always been most important to me is that Reformed accounts of God's providential work in the world take into full account the usefulness to God, in his establishment of the decree, of his knowledge of counterfactuals.

One reason for deeming "middle knowledge" a helpful name for the knowledge of counterfactuals that I suggest God used, in wisely deciding which particular world history he would create, was that this term had already been used by Molinism in arguing this point. I discern that the primary cause of resistance to the Molinist proposal, on the part

of 17th century Reformed theologians was that it was developed as part of a synergistic soteriology,⁷ but I have stated clearly that I consider Molinism incoherent and that I affirm a classically Reformed monergistic soteriology.

Some of the other classic Reformed objections to the concept of divine middle knowledge depend on its Molinist, synergist, formulation. But some of those objections cut more deeply; they express a concern that God's use of his knowledge of counterfactuals makes him dependent upon the creature.⁸ Consequently, if I concede that God's knowledge of counterfactuals is an aspect of his necessary knowledge but continue to argue that this knowledge is used by God when he decides upon which world he will create, much of my apologetic for what I have previously dubbed "middle knowledge Calvinism" is still necessary. Nevertheless, that apologetic should be easier when the position being defended is disassociated from "middle knowledge" with its Molinist and synergistic association.

Bruce Ware is another Calvinist theologian who has frequently expounded a "compatibilist middle knowledge" understanding. He may continue to affirm divine middle knowledge but he need not do so. This is apparent if one reads his presentation of "compatibilist middle knowledge and divine providence" in his chapter for the four views book that he recently edited.⁹ In my opinion, Ware succeeds in identifying biblical evidence that God knows counterfactuals *and* that he uses them in planning his work in

⁷ Tiessen, "Why Calvinists Should Believe," 356.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 356-58.

⁹ Ware, *Perspectives*, 109-20.

the world. Nevertheless, if one were to replace Ware's references to "middle knowledge" with "God's knowledge of counterfactuals," and to grant that God has this knowledge necessarily, Ware's fundamental argument would be unaffected.

Richard Muller makes this pertinent remark in his discussion of middle knowledge: "If the issue were simply the divine knowledge of future possibility---even of possibilities arising out of the contingent interaction of finite creatures---it could be easily understood under the rubric of the divine *scientia necessaria* or necessary knowledge of all possibility."¹⁰ If the necessary knowledge of God as understood in the Reformed tradition suffices for his wise decision to actualize a particular world, then the traditional Reformed view that God has only two kinds of knowledge is correct. I granted this possibility in my *WTJ* article,¹¹ but I now believe it to be the reality.

My response to the traditional Calvinist objections to divine middle knowledge, when their point of concern is God's deliberative use of the knowledge of "what A would do in C," is unaffected by a change in my terminology regarding God's knowledge. I now find myself in the line of theologians (like Gomarus, Walaeus and Richard Baxter) who (as reported by Muller),

though repelled by the Pelagianizing impact of this [i.e. Molina's] view, adapted the argument of Molina to refer, not to a *scientia media* between knowledge of the

¹⁰ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725. Volume Three: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 418.

¹¹ Tiessen, "Why Calvinists Should Believe," 356.

possible and knowledge of the actual, but to a *scientia hypothetica* prior to all of the divine determinations. In this view, God rests his *decretum* upon his knowledge of how the world order is to be constructed in its most minute hypothetical workings. The decree, therefore, establishes the freedom of secondary causes and allows for or permits the eventuality of sin and evil, though only in a hypothetical sense, namely, as events that will occur, given the actuality of the circumstances preceding. The point, in other words, is not that God learns from or reacts to a future possibility, but that God actualizes a particular concatenation of possibilities in which, given the particular set of circumstances directly willed, certain events will occur by reason of secondary causes, including the exercise of human free choice. The free choices belong, therefore, to the particular world order that God wills to actualize. As for God's 'foreknowledge' of all such actual events, it is necessary, certain, and determinate as it follows the decree and rests on the certainty of the divine causality.¹²

This sounds significantly similar to the intentions of my own proposal. What I have spoken about when I conceive of God's choosing a world to actualize is essentially what Muller describes as the "particular concatenation of possibilities in which, given the particular set of circumstances directly willed, certain events will occur by reason of secondary causes, including the exercise of human free choice." Similarly, the point most important in my previous construction is well described in Muller's description of the views of Walaeus, Gomarus and Baxter: "God rests his *decretum* upon his knowledge of how the world order is to be constructed in its most minute hypothetical workings."

¹² Muller, 420.

Given this strong similarity of intent, it may be that a more appropriate name for my model would be “hypothetical knowledge Calvinism.” That would have the advantage of not immediately attracting the negative response characteristically triggered in the Reformed tradition by reference to divine middle knowledge; it simply draws attention to a truth already affirmed by the tradition, the significance of which had not been sufficiently recognized.

Since the purpose of Molina’s affirmation of divine middle knowledge was to include in God’s deliberation leading up to his decree his knowledge of future counterfactuals (i.e. subjunctive conditionals) of libertarianly free acts, use of that term within a monergistic construction is counter-productive. A term such as “hypothetical knowledge” (or counterfactual knowledge) has the advantage that it focuses on the kind of knowledge God uses in formulating his decree rather than its place in the logical order. If that kind of knowledge is understood to be an aspect of God’s necessary knowledge, then we need only unpack its usefulness to God; we need not postulate that his deliberative *use* of the knowledge is itself a new kind of knowledge.

God’s relationship to time

Helm writes: “But as far as Tiessen is concerned the temporalist language must be an essential part of the description of the process by which God analyses and deliberates, an essential part of the character of his middle knowledge. It is hard to see how any attempt to eliminate such tensed terminology could succeed without resulting in the ‘middle knowledge’ becoming part either of God’s natural knowledge or of his free

knowledge.” He is troubled because “the status of this middle knowledge is that its ‘moment’ or ‘moments’ are temporal moments.”

Perhaps my acknowledgment that God knows counterfactuals necessarily and does not, therefore, need middle knowledge, will alleviate Helm’s concern. I am continuing to assert that God that God analyses and deliberates, that he considers possible worlds and chooses to actualize one of them, but this is not a new form of knowledge (as middle knowledge would be), it is the wise use of what God knows necessarily. God needs nothing beyond that necessary knowledge to make his decision to create this particular universe, something which God does freely, not out of necessity.

Despite my use of temporal language in speaking about God’s knowledge and decision, I would argue that my understanding of God’s use of his necessary knowledge of counterfactuals in forming his decree does *not* depend upon essential divine temporality. After all, when we consider God’s decree, we are speaking of God without a world. Even theologians who have argued for God’s temporal immanence in the universe have posited that God was timeless without the universe.¹³ I admit that it is very difficult

¹³ William Lane Craig, for instance, puts together three factors, that God exists in time, that time had a beginning, and that God did not have a beginning, and Craig concludes that “God must be causally, but not temporally, prior to the Big Bang. With the creation of the universe, time began, and God entered into time at the moment of creation in virtue of His real relations with the created order. It follows that God must therefore be timeless without the universe and temporal with the universe.” (*Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001]), 233. John Frame posits

for me to conceive of the dynamic relations between the persons of the Trinity and of a logical order of God's decrees in completely atemporal ways, or to think that God has no experience of a time before he created the world, or that the Son has no experience of *pre*-incarnate existence. Nevertheless, I acknowledge Millard Erickson's wisdom when he pleads agnosticism about whether God experiences succession and sequence within himself, because any assumption that God does would derive from an assumption that God's existence and experience are of just the same nature as ours and this would be folly.¹⁴

Professor Helm finds it "ironic that Molinist middle knowledge, . . . whatever else it may be burdened with, is not burdened with a temporalist account of God." This is a very important observation because it demonstrates that even those who originally speculated that God has middle knowledge, a logical moment in which he contemplates what libertarianly free creatures would do in possible worlds, did not consider that deliberation to require divine temporality. Consequently, now that I have rejected middle

that "God's experience of time, as Scripture presents it, is more like the atemporalist model than like the temporalist one" (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God. A Theology of Lordship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 557. Yet, in light of God's temporal omnipresence, Frame concludes: "So God is temporal after all, but not merely temporal. He really exists in time, but he also transcends time in such a way as to exist outside it" (559).

¹⁴ Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 276–77.

knowledge, I see no reason why my description of God’s deliberation upon his necessary knowledge of counterfactuals should pose any problems for complete atemporalists.

Francis Turretin writes: “The decree is ascribed to God not inasmuch as it is the effect of previous deliberation and consultation with reasoning passing from one thing to another (of which he has no need ‘to whose eyes all things are naked and most open,’ Heb. 4:13), but by reason of the certain determination concerning the futuration of things (according to which he does nothing rashly, but designedly, i.e., knowingly and willingly).”¹⁵ I do not know how God’s determining the future “designedly” rather than “rashly” differs essentially from his determining it with “deliberation,” but I do not perceive my proposal to be different in essence from that which Turretin affirms.

Furthermore, the temporality of my language concerning God’s contemplation of possible worlds, when he wisely decides which one he will actualize, could function metaphorically within Turretin’s own thoroughly atemporal concept of God’s eternal decree. He wrote: “Although some decrees may be said to be prior or posterior to others, it does not follow that they are not eternal in themselves because this is not said on the part of God (for so they are one only and a most simple act in God), but with respect to our manner of conception (who, on account of the distinct objects, cannot conceive of the decrees except distinctly by priority and posteriority).”¹⁶

¹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:311 (4.1.3).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:315 (4.2.6).

Conclusion

Clearly, Professor Helm's critique has been helpful to me. It has led me finally to abandon the attempt to incorporate divine middle knowledge into my Calvinist understanding of God's eternal purposing of the history of the universe, in all its detail. Since I do not share the Molinist desire to make libertarianly free human decisions a matter of God's knowledge distinct from his knowledge of himself, I have no need to affirm divine middle knowledge. Nevertheless, I continue to believe that God's knowledge of counterfactuals is useful to him in his wise decree concerning the futuration of everything that happens in the universe God creates and governs for his own glory.