

The grounding objection to middle knowledge revisited

STEVEN B. COWAN

Apologetics Resource Center, 130 Inverness Plaza, #166, Birmingham, AL 35242

Abstract: The Molinist doctrine that God has middle knowledge requires that God knows the truth-values of counterfactuals of freedom, propositions about what free agents would do in hypothetical circumstances. A well-known objection to middle knowledge, the grounding objection, contends that counterfactuals of freedom have no truth-value because there is no fact to the matter as to what an agent with libertarian freedom would do in counterfactual circumstances. Molinists, however, have offered responses to the grounding objection that they believe are adequate for maintaining the coherence of middle knowledge. I argue that these responses to the grounding objection are not adequate, and that what I call the ‘generic grounding objection’ still poses a serious challenge to middle knowledge.

There is a standard objection to the idea that God has middle knowledge that many philosophers find persuasive. This objection is called the *grounding objection*. The basic idea behind the grounding objection is the contention that God cannot have middle knowledge because the counterfactuals of freedom which are the objects of His middle knowledge have no truth-value. That is, there are no actual states of affairs to which such propositions correspond in order to provide truth conditions for their truth or falsity. There is, as Robert Adams has argued, no *ground* for the truth of a counterfactual of freedom.¹ William Hasker puts it this way: ‘In order for a (contingent) conditional state of affairs to obtain, its obtaining must be grounded in some categorical state of affairs. More colloquially, truths about “what *would be the case ... if*” must be grounded in truths about what *is in fact* the case.’² Since counterfactuals of freedom have no such grounds, they have no truth-value. And if they have no truth-value, then God cannot possibly know them because no-one, not even God, can know something that isn’t true. And, of course, this means that God cannot have middle knowledge.

Molinists, of course, have offered responses to the grounding objection. Sometimes these responses take the form of simply ‘holding the grounding objection at bay’, arguing that the grounding objection is not decisive. That is, even though the Molinist may not be able to explain how counterfactuals of freedom are grounded,

the grounding objection does not present a problem serious enough for the Molinist to reject his intuitions regarding their truth-value.³ At other times, advocates of middle knowledge have attempted to provide an account for the grounding of counterfactuals of freedom.⁴ These responses are, of course, more serious, but I do not find them very plausible. In fact, I think that the grounding objection provides the Molinist with a problem sufficient to call into doubt his commitment to the truth of counterfactuals of freedom. In what follows, I will attempt to make clear just what the grounding objection is, defining what I will call the *generic grounding objection*. And then I will defend this generic grounding objection against possible Molinist rejoinders.

The generic grounding objection

Let me begin by stating precisely the libertarian assumption made by Molinists in their defence of middle knowledge:

- (LA) Given any set of antecedent circumstances C , S is free in C with respect to an action x if and only if S is not determined to do either x or $\sim x$ in C .

Given this assumption, the *generic grounding objection* (GGO) to middle knowledge can be simply stated as follows:

- (GGO) If S is not determined to do x or $\sim x$ in C , then there is no fact of the matter to what S *would* do in C .

My contention, in defence of GGO, is that the very fact that S 's actions are undetermined (i.e. that S has libertarian freedom) vitiates any alleged counterfactual of freedom (where S is the subject) of any truth-value. For, if S is free to do x or refrain from x in C , there simply is no fact of the matter to what S *would* do. Notice that I am not claiming that there is no fact of the matter to what S actually does or will do (if S is actualized by God), but only that any claim as to what S would (counterfactually) do is neither true nor false. There is nothing about S , nor about C , nor about x , which would or could provide grounds for the truth that S does (for example) x in C .

The truth-value of any and every counterfactual of freedom, then, is indeterminate. And since they are indeterminate, God cannot know them. This is the generic grounding objection. And this objection, I contend, provides a powerful refutation of middle knowledge. I will attempt to justify this claim in what follows.

Responses to the generic grounding objection

Molinists have not sat still in the face of the grounding objection, as I indicated earlier. Many of them have offered responses to the grounding objection

which they believe show that it is not very powerful after all, and certainly not conclusive.⁵ In this section I will evaluate some of the more serious of these responses.

The analogy with future-tense statements

Some Molinists have responded to the grounding objection by arguing that the objection is analogous to arguments purporting to show that future-tense statements have no truth-value. In other words, to argue that:

- (A) If David had remained in Keilah, then Saul would have besieged the city

has no truth-value, is to make the same mistake as those who contend that categorical propositions about the future such as

- (B) Jesus will return bodily in 2010

have no truth-value. Now most of us believe that (B) has a definite truth-value. It is either true or it is false (probably false). And some very good arguments can be given to show that propositions like (B) do in fact have truth-value. But, the defenders of middle knowledge might say, if (A) has no truth-value, then neither does (B). William Lane Craig explains:

This argument [the grounding objection] seems to rest on the same misconception of truth as correspondence that we considered earlier. ... There we saw that at the time of the truth of future-tense statements, the reality to which they corresponded is nonexistent. All that the view of truth as correspondence requires of future-tense statements is that the realities described *will* exist. Similarly, at the time at which counterfactual statements are true, it is not required that the circumstances or actions referred to actually exist. The view of truth as correspondence requires only that such actions *would* be taken if the specified circumstances *were* to exist.⁶

The anti-Molinist can reply to this argument in one of three ways. First, he might simply bite the bullet and say, 'Well, so much the worse for future-tense contingent statements!' This would be, I suppose, the response given by open theists, who reject not only middle knowledge, but also God's foreknowledge of his creatures' future free acts.⁷ Second, the anti-Molinist might be a compatibilist, agreeing that arguments against counterfactuals of freedom and those against future-tense contingent statements do parallel one another, *if one assumes that libertarianism is true*. But, if libertarianism is false, then future-tense contingents will be grounded by the characters of human agents which *determine* what they will do in the future. Thus, future-tense statements such as (B) above would be grounded by, say, Jesus' *present* character (and/or God's decree). Counterfactuals of freedom, on the other hand, will still be ungrounded because they presuppose, by definition, the truth of libertarianism.⁸

The simpler response, however, is to say that it is all very well and good that counterfactuals of freedom would correspond to reality if the actions they refer to '*would* be taken if the specified circumstances *were* to exist', but it is precisely the question at issue as to whether in fact such actions *would* be taken. The grounding objection just is the view that there simply is no fact to the matter as to what an agent with libertarian freedom *would do* in a given hypothetical (or even actual) circumstance. That is, the problem that the grounding objection is raising is not simply that the antecedent and consequent of a statement like 'If David had remained in Keilah, then Saul would have besieged the city' refer to states of affairs that do not exist (which is the alleged problem with future-tense propositions). Rather, the problem revolves around the nature of agents who have libertarian freedom. It is because middle knowledge requires that God know counterfactuals of *freedom* – counterfactual statements about what free agents would (hypothetically) do in a given circumstance – that gives rise to the grounding objection.

Another way of putting this is to say that the parallel between anti-realism about counterfactuals of freedom and anti-realism about future-tense contingents is only superficial. When the anti-realist about future-tense contingents says that such propositions lack sufficient metaphysical grounding, then Craig's reply is perfectly adequate: 'In order for ... future-tense statements to be true [i.e. grounded], all that is required is that when the moment described arrives, the present-tense version of the statement will be true.'⁹ This is analogous to what we might say about past-tense statements. The past-tense statement

(C) George W. Bush won the 2000 Presidential election

is grounded not in some present, existent state of affairs, but in a past state of affairs which at the time of its occurrence was present. So, (C) is true just in case the present-tense counterpart

(D) George W. Bush wins the 2000 Presidential election

was in fact true. Likewise, the future-tense statement (B) above is true just in case the present-tense statement

(E) Jesus returns bodily in 2010

is true in 2010 – that is, just in case Jesus returns bodily in 2010.

But, the problem with grounding counterfactuals of freedom is not so simple. It is, in fact, quite a different problem. Take, once again, the counterfactual of freedom,

(A) If David had remained in Keilah, then Saul would have besieged the city.

With this proposition, unlike our future contingent above, there is no state of affairs, past, present, or future, to which we can point in order to ground the

counterfactual of freedom. That is, there is no time, past, present, or future, in which a present-tense version of (A) corresponds to an actual, present state of affairs.¹⁰ And it will not do to reply, as Craig has, that a ‘statement of the form “if P were placed in C, then P would do x ” is true if and only if P would do x if P were placed in C’.¹¹ Why not? Because whether or not P would do x in C is precisely the question at issue! *Of course* such a statement would be true if P would do x in C! But, *would* P do x in C? The grounding objection is the claim that such a question (given that P has libertarian freedom) admits of no answer. Simply asserting that there is an answer does not refute the grounding objection, but only begs the question against it.¹²

The appeal to possible world semantics

Another way in which Molinists have attempted to provide a ground for counterfactuals of freedom is to appeal to possible world semantics regarding counterfactuals. On the standard account, a counterfactual proposition is true if and only if, in the possible world(s) nearest the actual world in which the antecedent is true, the consequent is also true. So, for example,

- (A) If David had remained in Keilah, then Saul would have besieged the city

is true if and only if, in the possible world nearest the actual world in which David remained in Keilah, it is also true that Saul besieged the city. So, a counterfactual of freedom like (A) can be grounded if there is a possible world in which both the antecedent and consequent of (A) are true that is closer to the actual world than a possible world in which the antecedent is true and the consequent is false.

However, there is a familiar problem facing the Molinist at this point. There are certainly possible worlds in which David stays in Keilah and Saul besieges the city, but there are also possible worlds in which David stays in Keilah and Saul does not besiege the city. Which of these possible worlds are closer to the actual world? On the standard analysis, the ‘distances’ between possible worlds is measured by their overall similarities and differences. But, it is easy to imagine two possible worlds, W_1 and W_2 , that are exactly the same up to a time t in which David makes the decision to remain in Keilah, which differ subsequent to t in that in W_1 Saul besieges the city, and in W_2 Saul does not besiege the city. Again, which one is closer to the actual world? At first glance, it would seem that neither is closer.

Thomas Flint and others, however, have attempted to solve the problem in favour of Molinism. They appeal to Plantinga’s view that the similarity of possible worlds is partly determined by the counterfactuals they share.¹³ But, this seems to be an obvious case of circular reasoning. As William Hasker has argued, this response amounts to saying that a counterfactual of freedom is true in the actual world *because* its consequent is true in the world nearest the actual world in which

its antecedent is true, and 'that world *is* nearest to the actual world because it shares with the actual world the counterfactual [in question]'.¹⁴ This is clearly circular.

In fairness to the Molinist, though, Thomas Flint has anticipated Hasker's response.¹⁵ He says the charge of circularity here is once again reminiscent of the attack on future-tense statements. The anti-realist about future-tense statements might argue that such statements are ungrounded because, for any given future-tense statement, there are possible futures in which it is true and possible futures in which it is false. And there is no reason to consider one possible future as more privileged than the other. There is nothing about the world *at present* which grounds one possible future as opposed to the other. And it won't do as a response, says the anti-realist about future-tense statements, to allow that fundamentally future propositions be allowed to count as facts about the present because that would be question-begging. So, according to Flint, if we charge the Molinist with circularity we must charge the realist about future-tense statements with circularity.

My reply here is much the same as before. The similarity between the anti-realist regarding future-tense contingent statements and the anti-realist regarding counterfactuals of freedom is purely superficial. The truth-value of a future-tense statement such as

(B) Jesus will return bodily in 2010

is grounded here and now because, assuming that it is true, there will obtain, in 2010, the categorical state of affairs *Jesus returns bodily in 2010*. But no such state of affairs has obtained, does obtain, or ever will obtain regarding any counterfactual of freedom. Certainly, no such categorical states of affairs were available to God before He created the actual world, which is something required by middle knowledge. I must, then, concur with Hasker's assessment that since 'comparative similarity among possible worlds does *not* provide the grounding for the truth of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, then we have been given no answer whatever to the grounding objection'.¹⁶

The brute-fact 'argument'

Having been unable perhaps to offer an account of the grounding of counterfactuals of freedom, the Molinist has one more strategy, namely, to assert that counterfactuals of freedom are simply brute facts. Maybe the proponent of middle knowledge hasn't shown *how* counterfactuals of freedom are grounded, but this doesn't prove that they have no truth-value. It is intuitively plausible, they say, to maintain that there are indeed true counterfactuals of freedom and that God knows them. I am reminded here of Alvin Plantinga's response to Robert Adams, where he wrote, 'It seems to me much clearer that some

counterfactuals of freedom are at least possibly true than that the truth of propositions must, in general, be grounded in this way.¹⁷

So, the burden of proof is on the anti-Molinist to show why middle knowledge is incoherent or otherwise problematic, despite there being no definitive explanation for the grounding of counterfactuals of freedom. In other words, the middle-knowledge proponent may argue that counterfactuals of freedom are, as far as we know, brute facts about the universe. And why not? The anti-Molinist hasn't shown that they *can't* be brute facts. So, what prevents the Molinist from simply believing in the reality of counterfactuals of freedom in any case?

I suppose that nothing would prevent the Molinist from making this move. But, it would seem to me that this move would be an attempt to get something for nothing. Or, to get something *out of nothing*. It reminds me a lot of those critics of the cosmological argument who, in attempting to avoid the conclusion of the argument, deny the causal principle and ask why the (contingent) universe cannot simply be a brute fact. The defender of the cosmological argument can give no logically necessary reason in refutation of this desperate move, but he reminds the critic that the causal principle holds in other areas of enquiry, and clearly the causal principle is more plausible than its denial.

Likewise, the anti-Molinist may reply to the 'brute fact argument' by reminding the Molinist that the grounding requirement is met by other types of propositions. And since there is apparently no ground for counterfactuals of freedom, this means that the statement of the GGO:

If S is not determined to do x or $\sim x$ in C, then there is no fact of the matter to what S *would* do in C

is more plausible than its denial. Plantinga's intuitions notwithstanding, the burden of proof would seem to be on the Molinist.

The grounding objection triumphant

We have seen that attempts to ground the truth-value of counterfactuals of freedom is problematic at best. No plausible account for their grounding has (yet) been found. And this gives us reason to believe that the GGO does more than simply make counterfactuals of freedom mysterious. It gives us positive reason to think that they are in fact ungrounded, and that their truth-value is indeterminate. Let me explain it this way. Take the conditional proposition

(F) If the moon is made of green cheese, then the individual we take to be Alvin Plantinga is really an android.

Now both the antecedent and the consequent of this conditional are false (I'm sure that Alvin Plantinga will be glad to hear that!). But as you know, on truth-functional

logic, this proposition turns out to be true! Clearly, however, something has gone amiss. If such a proposition were to appear as a premise in an argument, we would all surely dismiss it as obviously fallacious. Why? Because, in ordinary discourse, when we assert a conditional proposition, we believe that there is some connection, (say) logical, causal, or probabilistic between the antecedent and the consequent. And, of course, there is no connection, no *relevance*, between the antecedent and the consequent of (F).

Now take the counterfactual conditional – not the counterfactual of freedom, but the counterfactual *simpliciter*:

- (G) If I were to offer my wife the choice between liver and onions or ice cream, then she would choose ice cream.

I believe, and I think I know, that (G) is true. I might even say to you, ‘If you knew my wife, then *you* would know that she would choose ice cream in this situation.’ Yet mark the antecedent of this last sentence very carefully: ‘If you *knew my wife ...*’. What am I saying? Am I not saying that if you knew, like I know, my wife’s character, her beliefs, her desires, habits, etc., then you would know what she would choose?

Why do we think that counterfactual conditionals like (G) have truth-value, and that we can and do know them? Isn’t it because we think (or assume) that there is a connection, probably a causal connection, between the antecedent and the consequent? I think so.

But now let us suppose that my wife has libertarian freedom. Let us suppose that, given any set of antecedent circumstances, such as my offering her the choice of liver and onions or ice cream, she is free in that circumstance to choose one or the other, to choose ice cream or refrain from ice cream. It seems to me that once we make this assumption, once we interject libertarianism into the situation, things *have* to change. They have to change because the connection we might otherwise assume between the antecedent and the consequent has been severed or (at least) significantly weakened. What grounded the truth of (G) without this assumption, namely, my wife’s character, can no longer serve that function. Assuming that the agents who are the subjects of counterfactuals have libertarian freedom weakens any connection or relevance between the antecedent and the consequent of those propositions. And this suggests that counterfactuals of freedom must be closer in our estimation to proposition (F) (‘If the moon is made of green cheese, then the individual we take to be Alvin Plantinga is really an android’) than to a non-libertarian version of proposition (G) (‘If I were to offer my wife the choice between liver and onions or ice cream, then she would choose ice cream’).

At best, the Molinist can assert a probabilistic connection between the antecedent and consequent of counterfactuals of freedom. But, to say

- (H) If David remained in Keilah, Saul would *probably* besiege the city

will not give the Molinist what he wants. For God to know what Saul would probably do does not amount to middle knowledge. So, if we think that propositions like (F) are absurd and ought not to be accepted as true – if we think, in other words, that (F) is ungrounded – then we have reason to think that counterfactuals of freedom are ungrounded as well.

The real culprit here, then – the basis of the grounding objection – is libertarianism, or perhaps more generally, indeterminism. As Peter van Inwagen has said, the grounding objection ‘depends on no other features of free acts other than the fact that they are undetermined (a consequence of incompatibilism)’.¹⁸ Now it is not my intent in this paper to critique indeterminism. It is my point here only that indeterminism has *implications* – implications for counterfactuals concerning free creatures that God is alleged to know prior to His creative decision, and for the ordinary counterfactuals in the actual world that you and I think we know, and which we use to guide us in our everyday lives.

In conclusion, if what I have said is on the mark, then counterfactuals of freedom are ungrounded. And if they are ungrounded, then they have no truth-value, and the statement of the GGO is true. Which means that God does not have middle knowledge.

Notes

1. Robert M. Adams ‘Middle knowledge and the problem of evil’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977), 109–117.
2. William H. Hasker *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 30.
3. Thomas Flint seems to make this point when he says that the “grounding” objection is far from the conclusive refutation of Molinism it is sometimes made out to be. Given that the cost for the libertarian of rejecting Molinism is the demolition of the traditional notion of providence, the “grounding” objection gives the orthodox Christian insufficient incentive to pay so high a price; Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 137.
4. See Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 178–179; Alfred J. Freddoso ‘Introduction’ to Luis de Molina *On Divine Foreknowledge*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 70–74; William Lane Craig ‘Hasker on divine knowledge’, *Philosophical Studies*, 67 (1992), 89–110; *idem The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1987), 140–141.
5. E.g. Craig *The Only Wise God*; *idem* ‘Hasker on divine knowledge’; *idem* ‘Robert Adam’s new anti-Molinist argument’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54 (1994), 857–861; *idem* ‘On Hasker’s defense of anti-Molinism’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998), 236–240. Another well-known defender of middle knowledge is Thomas Flint with *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*.
6. Craig *The Only Wise God*, 139–141; see also Thomas Flint *Divine Providence*, 129.
7. See, e.g. William Hasker’s claim to this effect in ‘A philosophical perspective’, in *idem The Openness of God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
8. For what it’s worth, this is the solution that I favour. I think that libertarianism is false, and that agents always act on the basis of their desires, so that what grounds their future actions is quite literally *present states of affairs*.
9. Craig *The Only Wise God*, 57.
10. The Molinist may respond to this point by asking about a situation in the actual world in which the antecedent of a counterfactual of freedom is true and the agent performs the action in question. For example, suppose we want to know if the counterfactual of freedom ‘If I were rich, I would buy a Mercedes’ is grounded. And let us suppose that through some fortuitous turn of events I do become

rich (say) by winning the lottery. And suppose that when I become rich, I do in fact buy a Mercedes. Well, asks the Molinist, wouldn't this show that the counterfactual of freedom in question is grounded? Not at all. All that this story would ground is 'If I am rich, I buy a Mercedes', and it does so simply because of the obtaining of the categorical states of affairs of *my being rich* and *my buying a Mercedes*. In any case, even if this counterfactual of freedom were grounded in this way, it would be of no help to God in deciding which world to create. For the counterfactuals of freedom that God needs to know for middle knowledge to work cannot involve actual decisions in the actual (post-Creation) world.

11. Craig *The Only Wise God*, 141.
12. Of course, William Lane Craig has argued the opposite point, namely, that the demand for a ground for such propositions as (A) begs the question against libertarianism, or, to put it in his words, 'The demand for a ground for volitional counterfactual states of affairs seems misguided. It implicitly presupposes that libertarianism and agent causation are false doctrines'; Craig 'Hasker on divine knowledge', 100. But this is not the case. What the anti-Molinist is doing is simply pointing out the *implications* of libertarianism for the truth-value of counterfactuals which refer to the actions of libertarianly free agents. It is one thing to say that 'Jones freely chooses *x*'. We can easily imagine that such a proposition about a free agent is grounded in the categorical state of affairs of *Jones freely choosing x*. But, it is another matter entirely to say that the conditional 'If Jones were in C, he would freely choose *x*' is grounded. Craig says it is grounded in the counterfactual state of affairs it describes. But what state of affairs is that? It is precisely the question at issue as to whether or not there is such a state of affairs.
13. *Ibid.*, 135–136.
14. William Hasker 'Review of Flint's *Divine Providence*', *Faith and Philosophy*, 16 (1999), 248–253.
15. Flint *Divine Providence*, 136–137.
16. Hasker 'Review of Flint's *Divine Providence*', 251. Timothy O'Conner has offered another account for the grounding of counterfactuals of freedom that deserves some mention; see Timothy O'Conner 'The impossibility of middle knowledge', *Philosophical Studies*, 66 (1992), 139–166. The account amounts to this: Suppose there is a free agent S in some possible world W which has a particular causal history up to some time t_1 . At t_1 , S is faced with a situation calling for a free choice regarding an action *x*. O'Conner claims that a counterfactual of freedom such as 'If S were in C, then he would do *x*' is true in virtue of the fact that (1) S must make *some* choice, and (2) there is a state of affairs at some time t_2 such that S does *x*. But, in reply, it simply does not follow from the fact that S does *x* at some future time and that he must make some choice with regard to *x* that the subjunctive conditional 'If S were in C, he would do *x*' is true. All that follows is 'If S were in C, he *will* do *x*'. That little word 'would' in the subjunctive makes all the difference in the world. Even if the future conditional about what S *will* do is true, this does nothing to show that the subjunctive future conditional about what S *would* (freely) do is true. Moreover, as O'Conner himself admits, this scenario involves the *actual* world and S's *actual* choice. The counterfactual of freedom involved in this case is one in which both the antecedent and the consequent actually obtain. O'Conner himself is not persuaded that this account can be extended to cover counterfactuals of freedom that are genuinely counterfactual and involve future events (as must be the case if middle knowledge is to work).
17. Alvin Plantinga 'Reply to Robert Adams', in James E. Toberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (eds) *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 378.
18. Peter van Inwagen 'Against middle knowledge' (unpublished paper delivered at the Northern Illinois University philosophy colloquium in 1997. It can found at www.soci.niu.edu/phildept/speakers/VanInwagen_AgainstMiddleKnowledge.html).