

THE ANTINOMIES OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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Abstract: This article considers several antinomies that arise in our consideration of divine providence, and shows how these antinomies are resolved in the light of the three main theories of providence: Augustinianism, Molinism, and Open Theism.

Keywords: Augustine, Molinism, Open Theism, Divine Providence, Human Freedom

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«How does God run the world?»¹. That is the central question about divine providence. An answer to this question, at a suitable level of generality, is what I shall term a theory of providence. This essay will review and assess the logical structure of the main theories of providence that are available to orthodox Christians. The essay has a tripartite form, somewhat like an arched entryway. The pillars on either side of the entryway consist of major antinomies arising from the doctrine of providence; these are perplexities that have occurred to many reflective believers, and they serve to delineate the range of options that are available to us. The connecting arch between the pillars consists of two additional antinomies that pertain to one particular theory of providence. It is hoped that, by passing through the entryway, we will reach a standpoint from which we can obtain a clear view and a better appreciation of the attractions and disadvantages of the various theories that compete for our acceptance.

1. *The First Pillar: The Antinomy of Divine and Human Control*

The first antinomy of providence is familiar to all of us; I term it the *antinomy of divine and human control*. There is no question that the Christian mind, in certain contexts, wishes to affirm that everything that takes place occurs in accordance with the divine will and control. To multiply citations would be to becloud the obvious, so I will content myself with a single biblical text, Ephesians 1,11, which refers to «the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will». It is equally clear, on the other hand, that we do and must consider certain matters as lying within the control and responsibility of human beings, and perhaps other rational creatures. Here again, a single text will have to suffice, so we turn to the challenge issued at the end of his life by Moses to the people of Israel: «See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees, and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess» (Deuteronomy 30,15-16).

The antinomy can now be stated as follows: God fully controls everything that takes place in the world; nevertheless, certain matters are within the

¹ This article was previously published as: W. Hasker, *The Antinomies of Divine Providence*, in “Philosophia Christi”, 2002, n. 4, pp. 365-379. Reprinted with the permission of the Journal. More info can be found about “Philosophia Christi” at: www.epsociety.org (17\04\2022).

control and responsibility of human beings. It should be noted that this antinomy embodies a genuine contradiction; at least, this is so if “control” is used univocally in its two occurrences. “Control” in this sense cannot be exercised simultaneously over the same matters by two independent agents. Control can, of course, be shared between agents, but in that case neither agent has full control independent of the other. In order to resolve the contradiction, either “control” must be used in different senses when speaking of God and of created agents, or else the extent and nature of the control exercised must be qualified on one side or the other.

But are such modifications really needed? Can’t we simply accept each side of the antinomy in its full force, acknowledge the resulting paradox, and move on to other matters? What is at stake here, of course, is whether logical contradictions must be expunged from theology. There is a considerable tradition that holds this need not be done; reality is either inherently paradoxical, or else so impenetrably mysterious that we can have no reasonable hope of grasping it in a way that is free from contradictions². I have to say, however, that I am simply unable to adopt this strategy as my own. If logical contradiction does not constitute a sufficient reason for rejecting a position, then I will turn in my philosopher’s union card; I no longer know any way of practicing my trade. To be sure, if all the available options reveal themselves as hopelessly flawed, we may find ourselves with a tension in our thinking we are unable to resolve. But that unhappy conclusion should at least wait until we have exhausted the non-contradictory options available to us.

Each of the three major theories of providence makes an attempt to resolve the contradiction. The first such theory is that of theological determinism or, to give it a historical label, Augustinianism³. This theory holds, quite simply and straightforwardly, that God determines everything that happens. There are no constraints whatever, independent of the divine will, to which that will must adjust its plans. Human beings and other created agents have control in the sense that what they do has an effect, sometimes a major

² For a view of this type, see J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove 1961, pp. 18-24. Packer views an antinomy as an *apparent* contradiction, one for which however we are unable to find any rational resolution. A major problem for this approach is how we are to distinguish such “merely apparent” contradictions from real contradictions.

³ This is preferable to other possible designations, such as Thomism or Calvinism, in being comparatively non-denominational. Augustine was the first Christian theologian to give a clear articulation of this view, and he was unquestionably a major influence on later theological determinists, whether Catholic or Protestant.

effect, on the course of worldly events. But they are “controlled controllers”; whatever power they exercise is ultimately God’s power, and *they do and must exercise it precisely in the way that God has efficaciously decreed*. The antinomy is resolved by assigning all control finally to God and none to creatures.

The second theory of providence to be considered is the one that is coming to be known as the “open view” of God. This phrase, derived from the book, *The Openness of God*⁴, has multiple connotations: God is relationally “open” towards his creatures, and also towards the future, which is itself “open” to alternatives and thus as yet ontologically indeterminate. As a further descriptive label for this view, I suggest we call it the “risk-taking” theory of providence. The key idea is one that has become quite familiar in recent years: God, who potentially has absolute, meticulous control exactly as posited by theological determinism, *has willingly chosen to become self-limited* by creating free persons on whom he bestows limited but nevertheless quite significant powers to affect both their own lives and the world around them. Since God has chosen to create these beings, and is capable at any time of acting in ways that would constrain or terminate their power to act independently of his control, it can be truthfully said that God at all times retains ultimate control over his creation. But insofar as he chooses to permit them the freedom to choose their own paths through the world, God runs a very real risk that they will reject his will and adopt a course of action that is seriously destructive. He does this, according to the risk-taking view, because he loves us and because we can return his love in a meaningful fashion only if he allows us the freedom to choose whether or not to love and serve him. So once again, the antinomy is resolved, this time by asserting that God’s control, while potentially absolute, is *voluntarily self-limited* so as to allow a measure of freedom and control to the creatures. The full conformity of creation to the Creator’s will posited in Ephesians 1,11 is to be realized in the final consummation; this text is not by any means an empirical description of the present state of the world.

It should perhaps be added here that the theory of divine risk-taking, in its consistent form, holds that since the contingent future is as such ontologically indeterminate it is not capable of being known with exactness even by a perfect Knower. (A perfect Knower knows all and only what exists to be known.) This, however, is by no means the most significant part of the theory. Rather surprisingly, this matter of comprehensive divine foreknowledge turns

⁴ Cfr. C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker, D. Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove 1994.

out to be theologically quite unimportant! This is so, because “simple foreknowledge” (foreknowledge without middle knowledge) and divine timelessness, as these views are usually understood, afford *no advantage whatsoever* over the open view of God with respect to God’s providential governance of the world⁵. The doctrine of timelessness can, however, be combined with theological determinism (as it is by most Thomists) or with middle knowledge; in principle, then, timelessness is neutral between the three views of providence, rather than constituting a distinct alternative on its own.

The third theory of providence to be considered is the theory of divine middle knowledge, also called Molinism after the sixteenth-century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina. This theory has the best claim of the three to maintaining both sides of the original antinomy, though as we shall see, some modification is still required. The distinctive affirmation of Molinism concerns God’s knowledge of a certain class of propositions, often referred to as “counterfactuals of creaturely freedom”. These propositions have to do with the outcomes of choices made by creatures who are free in the libertarian sense. God, of course, is thought to know in advance how each such choice will be made. But God’s knowledge is not limited to *actual* free choices; rather, God is said to know, concerning each actual creature, what that creature *would choose* to do in any *possible* situation of libertarian free choice in which it might be placed. Furthermore, God knows concerning *possible but non-actual* free creatures⁶ what each of them would freely choose to do in any of the myriads of situations in which it might find itself.

The ascription of this sort of knowledge to God has some impressive theological payoffs. For one thing, it gives us a way of understanding God’s knowledge of the future which does not involve the difficult notion that God has somehow “direct vision” of an as yet non-existent future state of affairs.

By knowing his own creative intentions, God knows which creatures he will create and which situations they will encounter, and the relevant counterfactual of freedom then informs God what each such creature will do in the situation in question. Even more important, however, is the benefit this theory offers for divine providence. The counterfactuals of freedom enable God to anticipate the precise outcome of any divine actions in creation and providential governance. God is thus able to review all of the feasible scenarios for the course of universal history, and select the very one that best corresponds with

⁵ For argument, see my *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1989, ch. 3.

⁶ Since there are no creatures that do not exist, this knowledge strictly speaking concerns uninstantiated essences, and states what their instances would do in various situations.

his creative purposes. In this way God can be absolutely certain in advance that his plan will be realized exactly as he conceives of it; the element of risk is eliminated entirely.

And now we are in a position to see how it is that Molinism can satisfy – or nearly satisfy – both sides of the original antinomy. Human control is maintained without qualification; human beings have it fully within their power to act in any of several different ways, and it is their free decisions that, in important respects, shape the course of events. Yet it can also be said that each and every event is fully under God’s control, since each event that occurs is part of a providential plan God has formulated from eternity and whose exact fulfillment in every detail is guaranteed. There is, however, a significant qualification to this affirmation of divine control. God does *not* control the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom; they are “givens” to which God has no choice but to adjust his plans. And this does place constraints on God’s control, so that it is quite possible that God *is not able* to bring about the sort of world he most desires. Perhaps God would prefer a world in which a great many creatures freely choose to love and serve him, but in which sin never raises its ugly head. But if, as Alvin Plantinga has speculated, all possible free creatures are tainted with “transworld depravity”⁷, a world of the sort described cannot be actualized by God. So Molinism doesn’t mean that God can get just any world he wants, but it does mean he can be sure of getting the world he plans for.

Having set out the three main theories of providence, we move on to the task of assessment. Perhaps I should state, however, that Augustinianism will receive somewhat less attention here than either Molinism or the theory of divine openness. This should not be taken to imply that Augustinianism is less worthy of a careful assessment; it is just that one can’t do everything in a single essay.

2. *The Arch: Two Molinist Antinomies*

We now address two antinomies that have their home within a specific theory of providence, namely Molinism. It might be thought that this procedure shows bias – that we ought rather to select antinomies even-handedly from both the risk-taking view and Molinism. It is a fact, however, that the

⁷ A creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity if and only if, in every feasible world in which that essence is instantiated and the instantiation is free with respect to some choice between moral good and evil, the instantiation makes at least one morally wrong decision. See A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1974, pp. 186-189.

risk-taking view is remarkably free of the sorts of antinomies we will be considering here. The perceived deficiencies of that view stem rather from its theological implications, which will be addressed in the next section of the paper. For now, then, we turn to the antinomies generated by the theory of divine middle knowledge.

The first of these may be termed the antinomy of the ungrounded conditionals. Stated more fully, the antinomy consists in the fact that the counterfactuals of freedom are said to be true propositions, but there is no intelligible basis, reason, or ground for their being true. One way for the Molinist to meet this objection is to demand an account of the “grounding relation” which is assumed in the objection⁸. I have no general account of this relation to offer, but the point can be made by rehearsing the sorts of grounds that exist for other classes of conditional propositions. Logically necessary conditionals are true in virtue of the laws of logic, plus the logical properties of the concepts involved in those propositions. Metaphysically necessary conditionals are grounded in the same way, and in addition by the essential properties of individuals and kinds of individuals mentioned in the propositions. Laws of nature are true in virtue of the inherent causal powers of the natural entities referred to in the laws. Probabilistic conditionals are true in virtue of the non-deterministic propensities of the entities involved. And finally, a material conditional is true in virtue of the falsity of its antecedent or the truth of its consequent.

None of these sorts of grounding is available for the counterfactuals of freedom. They are not logically or metaphysically necessary, nor are they supported by natural laws. (If they were, they could not be counterfactuals of *freedom*.) Nor are they truth-functional like material conditionals. They have not been caused to be true either by God or by the created agents involved. The superficially plausible suggestion that they are true in virtue of the character and disposition of the creaturely agents also fails, because in each case where a genuinely free choice occurs, there is a possible world where the agent has exactly the same disposition and character, functioning in exactly the same circumstances, in which a different choice is made.

The fact of the matter is that, in spite of considerable efforts by friends of Molinism, no remotely plausible grounding for the truth of counterfactuals of freedom has yet been suggested. In the light of this situation, it seems the best the Molinist can do is to posit these counterfactuals as ultimate, ungrounded facts: they just *are true*, in spite of the fact that there is no further

⁸ For this see A. Plantinga, *Replies to my Colleagues*, in J. E. Tomberlin, P. van Inwagen (eds.), “Alvin Plantinga”, Riedel, Dordrecht 1985, p. 378.

fact whatsoever in virtue of which they are true. Whether this is a satisfactory answer or not is something readers must decide for themselves.

The second Molinist antinomy may be termed *the antinomy of the open causal past*. In order to understand this antinomy, a bit of stage-setting is needed. It is obvious upon reflection that it is possible to state propositions concerning a particular time, whose truth depends on events that will occur subsequent to the time in question. Consider, for instance, the following example: “During 1998, the future Democratic presidential nominee was investigated for possible campaign finance violations”. Clearly, the truth of this depends on whether Al Gore is ever nominated for the presidency, and we may assume that the answer to this question is as yet undetermined (I am writing this in late 1998). If this is so, and it is an open possibility whether or not his nomination will occur, it must be similarly an open possibility whether the proposition cited will turn out to be true or false.

That a proposition is about the past, yet its truth and falsity are both still open possibilities, seems to conflict with our intuition that the past is fixed, settled, and beyond anyone’s power to make it otherwise. Recently, this difficulty has been met by distinguishing “hard facts” about the past, those whose truth is indeed irrevocably determined, from “soft facts” whose truth remains an open question until some future event has occurred. But delineating these two classes in detail has proved a difficult problem, as can be seen from the continuing controversy over the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom⁹. There is, however a very plausible candidate for a *sufficient condition* for a fact’s being “hard”, determinately settled, and beyond anyone’s control. The candidate condition is as follows: *A fact is fixed and definite at a time t if it has had a causal influence on the world’s history prior to t*. A little reflection suggests that this is hard to deny. Events that have a causal influence are, by definition, events such that the future might have been different had they not occurred. So if an event has had such an influence, and yet it is an open question whether the event occurred or not, it must also be an open question whether any of the subsequent events influenced by that event occurred or not. Assuming that the spread of causal influence is limited by the speed of light, it follows that the later events that could in principle be influenced by a given event include *all* events on the same planet which occur even a fraction of a second later. So if an event that has exerted causal influence is nevertheless “open”, in the sense that it could still turn out otherwise,

⁹ For a selection of articles debating the freedom/foreknowledge issue in these terms, see J.M. Fischer (ed.), *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1989.

then *all* subsequent events on the same planet are likewise open, and the supposed fixity of the past is sheer illusion. And this, I submit, is a conclusion we ought to be extremely reluctant to accept¹⁰.

Now, consider Molinism's account of the counterfactuals of freedom and divine middle knowledge. God's middle knowledge is part of the "prevolitional" knowledge by which, prior to deciding upon his act of creative will, God knows what the full consequences of any particular decision on his own part would be. Indeed, God's decision about which creative act of will to perform (as Plantinga would say, about which possible world to weakly actualize) is *crucially guided* by his middle knowledge; that, in fact, is the whole point of the Molinist conception of providence. In the light of his middle knowledge, God surveys the creative options available to him¹¹, and selects the one that is most pleasing and most in harmony with his ultimate purposes for his creation. Middle knowledge is intimately involved in the process by which the world comes to be as it is; it is causally relevant in the highest degree. This is, in fact, one of the important differences between middle knowledge and divine foreknowledge of the actual future. From the Molinist perspective, one of the most striking things about divine foreknowledge is that it is *not* thus causally embedded in the past history of our world. As Thomas Flint says,

It is important to note that, on this Molinist picture, God's foreknowledge is neither the effect nor the cause of our free actions. Foreknowledge follows immediately from God's conjoining his creative act of will to his prevolitional knowledge; he has no need to observe or to be causally impacted in any way by the events he foreknows in order to know them. Even so, *that foreknowledge should not be seen as in any sense the cause of that which is foreknown*. God's foreknowledge and the contingent event foreknown are, in effect, two separate consequences of the creative act of will God selects. Indeed, foreknowledge is virtually *epiphenomenal*, in the sense that it is the *causally impotent byproduct* of a causally cornucopian act of divine will¹².

¹⁰ Conceivably, one might hold that if a causally effective past event is still "open", its openness affects only those subsequent events that *actually* would have been different, had the past event not occurred. This doesn't seem right to me; I think the right way to think about the immutability of the past makes this a *logical* constraint, not one whose extent is controlled by empirical accident with regard to the spread of causal influence. But even if the proposed modification were adopted, the consequences for Molinism would be extremely serious.

¹¹ This does not, of course, involve temporal succession; we are concerned here rather with logical dependence, or explanatory priority.

¹² T. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998, pp. 44-45 (emphasis added).

Flint goes on to quote Molina to the effect that it is precisely because foreknowledge has no causal consequences that «no prejudice at all is done to freedom of choice or to the contingency of things by God’s foreknowledge»¹³.

But if this is so, then we are led by the foregoing discussion to count God’s knowledge of the counterfactuals of freedom, and with it the counterfactuals God knows, as part of the world’s causal history and thus part of the fixed past. Molinism, however, is unable to accept this conclusion. For suppose, as in Flint’s example, Cuthbert is at a certain point in time considering the purchase of an iguana¹⁴. Suppose that the true counterfactual of freedom – the counterfactual God contemplated and which played a role in his decision concerning which possible world to actualize – states that, under the given circumstances, Cuthbert would freely choose to purchase the iguana. If however Cuthbert is *free* in the given situation, then it must be an open possibility that he will *not* purchase the iguana. But for that to be an open possibility, the truth or falsity of the counterfactual of freedom in question must also be an open possibility, and so must be the fact that it is *that* counterfactual that God contemplated in making his creative decision rather than some other counterfactual stating that Cuthbert would make a different decision.

So in order to avoid the conclusion that Cuthbert’s decision is already fixed, “hardened”, and such that he could not make it differently, the Molinist is compelled to hold that *the occurrence or non-occurrence of events that have had a causal influence in the past still remains an open question*. And if this is so, our intuitions about the fixity of the past must be almost entirely illusory. Once again, the reader must decide for herself whether this conclusion is tolerable.

3. *Second Pillar: The Antinomy of Divine Planning and Pathos*

The second general antinomy of divine providence is here entitled the antinomy of divine planning and pathos. It may be stated as follows: God has a detailed plan for everything that occurs in the world, yet God exhibits powerful affective responses to the various things that take place. Unlike the antinomy of divine and human control, this antinomy does not even have the appearance of a formal contradiction. Yet there does seem to be at the very

¹³ Ivi, p. 45; the citation is taken from L. de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, translated with introduction by A. J. Freddoso, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988, in “Disputation 52, section 29”, p. 184.

¹⁴ For Cuthbert, see Flint’s *Divine Providence*, op. cit., p. 39.

least a strong incongruity: if everything that happens is in accord with God's plan, then why is God so powerfully affected by these events when they occur? In a sense, this antinomy lies even deeper than the antinomy of divine and human control, so that if one considers that antinomy to have been successfully resolved, one is still left to wonder at the divine pathos¹⁵.

This notion of the divine pathos, however, needs a bit of spelling out. In reading the books of the prophets, one cannot help but be struck by the intense emotional involvement of God with his people. God is alternately comforting, indignant, triumphal, furious, grief-stricken, tender, threatening – the range of emotive responses is very wide. Consider, for example, these words from the prophecy of Hosea:

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let me remove the adulterous look from her face, and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. Otherwise I will strip her naked, and make her as bare as on the day she was born. I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst. Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert, and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. (Hosea 2, 2-3;14-15)

There is a strong contrast here between the rightful anger of Yahweh as the ill-used husband, and the tender yearning in which he purposes to restore Israel as his beloved bride. Similar dramatic portrayals of divine emotion are frequent in the pages of Scripture; the question is how they should be understood. One possibility is to take them at face value, as presenting an essentially truthful picture, allowing of course for figurative language and anthropomorphism, of God's emotive responses to the various things that occur in the world and in the lives of his people.

But theologians and philosophers are often reluctant to accept such passages as even approximately truthful. A sharply contrasting view was suggested (in a different religious context, to be sure) by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes, who wrote:

¹⁵ This term is taken from Abraham Heschel, who writes, «God does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world and he reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging facts, so to speak, “objectively”, in detached impassibility. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events» (A.J. Heschel, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism*, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild, The Free Press, New York 1959, p. 116).

If oxen and horses and lions had hands, and could draw with their hands and do what man can do, horses would draw the gods in the shape of horses, and oxen in the shape of oxen, each giving the gods bodies similar to their own¹⁶.

Without doubt, Xenophanes would have been just as severe in his strictures on the attribution of emotions to God, as he was with regard to physical descriptions of the deity. Such talk about the gods, he tells us, however affecting it may be, belongs to the domain of *mythos* rather than that of *logos*. A fitting account of the divine must be drawn rather from the insights of the philosophers.

A stance such as that of Xenophanes is incompatible with regarding the Scriptures as in any serious sense a divine revelation. And yet, a somewhat similar account has actually been accepted as normative by the major traditions of Christian theology. The descriptions of God in terms of human emotions, according to this account, are by no means to be accepted as accurate depictions, but neither are they to be dismissed as sheer mythology. Rather, they represent what one theologian has termed “the divinely inspired misinformation about God”. On this view, God is not really affected by emotions, any more than he carries out his actions by means of bodily movements. However, it serves God’s purposes that he should be authoritatively represented as undergoing emotive states that are never actually his. This, it is said, is part of the “accommodation” of revelation to human capacity. But what, it may be asked, is the point of the accommodation in this case? Only one answer seems at all plausible: God is represented as undergoing emotive states, because in this way the human recipients of revelation are motivated to respond to God in the ways God wishes them to respond. But this, if correct, suggests a kind of strategy that, in a human ruler, would seem far less than admirable. Consider the case of a governor of a state who, in the midst of a natural disaster affecting its citizens, puts out repeated bulletins emphasizing his profound sympathy with the victims. In fact, however, he remains quite unaffected, except for considerations about how his handling of the disaster may affect his chances for re-election. Unfortunately, such conduct would not really shock or surprise us very much, but it hardly seems a fitting model for the divine governance of the universe.

However that may be, this model (absent the unflattering comparison with a human ruler) has actually been the one most frequently adopted, in keeping with the doctrine of divine impassibility. This doctrine has usually

¹⁶ J. Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1968, p. 52; Diels-Kranz 21 B 15.

been justified on metaphysical grounds. But there is a fairly direct route to the doctrine of impassibility from the considerations about divine providence discussed in this paper. If indeed God has a detailed plan for everything that occurs in the world, and everything that takes place is strictly in accord with that plan, then how is it possible to accept at anything like face value the ascription to God of intense emotional responses to the events as they occur? In particular, how are we to understand the adverse responses – the anger against sin, the pain of the spurned lover, the indignation at the harms inflicted by the enemies of Israel? Aren't we forced to discount such reactions – to regard them as part of the dramatic narrative, but as by no means accurate depictions of God's state of mind? The situation is particularly difficult for Augustinianism, for on this view *everything that takes place is exactly as God wishes it to be; there is no possible world God would prefer to the actual world in any respect*. If we are told, then, that God has a deep and abiding anger at the unrighteousness that takes place on the earth, our only possible response is that this simply cannot be: to represent God as angry and hostile to situations which are exactly as he wishes them to be, is just incoherent – or worse, it is to represent God as afflicted with something like schizophrenia. It may, all the same, please God for some reason to *represent himself* as opposed to sin and angry with its perpetrators. But the wise will understand that such representations can in no way correspond with the actual truth of the matter.

The situation is only marginally better for Molinism. It is true that for Molinism the evil deeds done by free creatures are chosen by them in the face of the real possibility of their acting otherwise. Even so, God retains a very large measure of control. As Thomas Flint has stated, «if Judas sins, it is because God knowingly put him in a set of circumstances in which he would sin, and knowingly refrained from putting him in a set of circumstances in which he would act virtuously»¹⁷. Viewing the situation in a broader context, it remains true that, whatever wrongs and harms the world's history may contain, God has specifically chosen the enactment of *that particular history* in preference to any other history that is feasible, given the counterfactuals of freedom that are actually true. At most, God's bliss in contemplating this world might be tinged faintly with regret that, in certain respects, things are not even better. But God is certainly familiar with the truth that you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, and God has specifically chosen which eggs will get broken in order to make this most excellent of omelets. The doctrine of divine impassibility is nearly as inescapable for Molinism as it is for Augustinianism.

¹⁷ T. Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

For the open view of God, things are much different. That view freely confesses that in this world of ours *things do not always go in accordance with God's plan*. To be sure, God is not resourceless when this occurs: in the words of Thomas Oden, «If Eden is Plan A, and Eden does not work out, due to the self-determining volatility, frailty, and fallibility of human freedom, then God has a Plan B and a Plan C»¹⁸. But the deviations from God's perfect and loving intentions that make Plan B and Plan C necessary are not in any sense approved or intended by God. And because of this, the open view is able to take very much at face value the biblical ascription to God of a wide range of emotional responses to such worldly events. Whether this constitutes a strength of the open view (as I think it is) or a weakness, is something readers must judge for themselves.

Closely related to the issue of the divine pathos is the problem of evil. For the problem of evil asks, If God is indeed supremely good and thus is adamantly opposed to sin and evil, then why do we see so much of both sin and evil in this world? Clearly, one's answer to this is greatly affected by one's overall theory of providence. It seems clear to me, as to many others, that the more complete one asserts God's control over worldly events to be, the more difficult it is to find a viable solution to the problem of evil. Thus, I judge the problem to be rationally insoluble for Augustinianism, to be only slightly easier for Molinism, and to be considerably less difficult (though still far from easy) for the open view of God. Thomas Flint, however, questions my claim that the open view is better placed than Molinism to deal with this problem¹⁹. He claims, on the contrary, that

all things considered, God's lacking middle knowledge would make the problem of evil even more difficult for the Christian to handle. For if God knows only probabilities, then he takes enormous risks in creating significantly free beings: he risks creating a world in which many, or most, or even all of his free creatures consistently reject him, a world in which they use their freedom to degrade others and themselves. It seems to me that one can reasonably argue that a good and loving God would not take such a risk²⁰.

In response to this, I invite Flint to consider *the actual world*, in which not all (God be thanked!), but certainly many and perhaps most of our fellow-

¹⁸ T.C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Harper, San Francisco 1987, p. 306.

¹⁹ That the problem is more easily answered without the Molinist assumption is affirmed both by Alvin Plantinga (*Replies*, op. cit., p. 379), and by Robert Adams (*Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil* in his "The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology", Oxford University Press, New York 1987, p. 90).

²⁰ T. Flint, op. cit., p. 107.

creatures «consistently reject him, [...] [and] use their freedom to degrade others and themselves». And now consider this question: is this situation *easier* to reconcile with the goodness and love of God if we suppose that *every particular instance of evil and suffering was specifically planned and ordained by God to occur*? Or is it better to say that God has indeed taken risks in creating this world, and that God's heart is deeply grieved at the grave misuse many of us make of our freedom?²¹

It seems likely that Flint and I are conceiving of the problem of evil in somewhat different ways. The question he seems to be asking is: which view of providence is the one that, provided we embrace it confidently, best assures us that the evils of the world are “under control”, that every one of the evils that perplex us has a good reason in God's ultimate purpose? If this is the question we are asking, the right answer may well be Augustinianism, which assures us that each particular evil has been deliberately selected by God as part of the world-history that, out of all the logical possibilities, is most pleasing to God and most in accord with his creative purposes. Augustinianism does not even need the reservation offered by Molinism, that the counterfactuals of freedom are less favorable than they might be, thereby limiting the range of God's creative choices. For Augustinianism everything is, quite literally, just as it should be and just as God wants it to be. (There is, to be sure, the important ethical question whether we *ought* to be thus reconciled to the world's evils.)

My own view of the problem of evil is rather different. The question as I see it is: which view of providence offers the best chance of reconciling

²¹ Jeff Jordan, commenting on an earlier version of this paper, agreed with me that risk-taking can be morally admirable in certain circumstances. He pointed out, however, that there is a need to discuss what those circumstances are, and whether divine risk-taking meets the requirements. This is an important question, one that deserves a fuller response than can be given here. But we can identify certain conditions that, if satisfied, tend to make the taking of risks morally admirable rather than the reverse. A wise person does not take serious risks for their own sake, but in order to obtain some important good that could not, or not so well, be obtained in any other way. In the case of God's risk-taking, the primary good in view is the creation of a community of persons in free and loving communion with God and with each other. Secondly, insofar as a risk is taken that imperils other persons, those others should be among those who can benefit if the risk succeeds. Thirdly, if risk-taking results in undeserved harm or loss to others, the risk-taker should share in that harm or loss to the extent possible. (It is partly for this reason that the open view insists on divine passibility.) Finally, insofar as it lies in his power, a good person will see to it that others are not finally and irremediably harmed through a risk he has taken, except through their own fault. It is because of this that I find myself constrained to hold that every human being has a genuine opportunity to share in the salvation made possible by Jesus Christ, even though it remains mysterious, in many cases, when and how that opportunity is offered to them.

the goodness and power of God with the evidence of evil in the world? And this question leads in a very different direction than the one posed in the previous paragraph. Asserting God's absolute, risk-free control over the events of history may be reassuring, provided one is able to accept such a view. But the more absolute the control, the stronger the apparent conflict between the goodness and love of God and the tragic course often taken by events. In this context, all the advantage lies with a view which recognizes that a genuine though limited autonomy has been granted by God to created agents.

The Molinist view of providence presents to us the idea of a world that is, in certain respects, remarkably *safe*; it is a world in which, «down to the smallest detail, things are as they are because God knowingly decided to create such a world»²². In such a world, we think, there may indeed be many things whose reasons we do not understand. After all, who are we to claim to plumb the secrets of the divine counsels? But there will be, there can be, nothing *ultimately* without a good reason, nothing which does not, in the end, play a constructive role in the wise and good plan God has for the world.

Without doubt, many Christians would like to believe we live in such a world, and find comfort in the thought that we do. That everything that ever happens has its good and sufficient reason in the divine plan, and thus no evil is ultimately pointless (though many evils may seem pointless to us in our present, inevitably short-sighted, view of things) – that this should be so is a source of comfort to many. Until, that is, a truly horrendous example of evil confronts us, such as the case of Zosia, a young Jewish girl in the Warsaw ghetto, whose eyes were literally ripped from their sockets by Nazi soldiers for their own amusement²³. Isn't there is something obscene about supposing that there is some "greater good" in terms of which such an enormity can be justified? The New Testament, in contrast, does not view the world as a safe place. On the contrary: as Greg Boyd has recently reminded us, the world is seen to be a *war zone*, and in a war zone atrocities and horrendous evils are the norm rather than the exception. The ultimate victory of God's cause is not in doubt, but at present that victory for the most part *is not evident to us*. Our God is a *fighting God*, one whose arm is strong and whose final triumph cannot be prevented – but in the meantime, much can and does happen that is contrary to his loving will and purpose for his creatures. It is this vision of God, and his providence, that the open view of God seeks to capture.

²² Ivi, p. 75.

²³ See G.A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove 1997, pp. 33-34.