Modest Molinism: An Explanation and Defense

MICHAEL BERGMANN
Purdue University
bergmann@purdue.edu

Abstract: Molinism, which says that God has middle knowledge, offers one of the most impressive and popular ways of combining libertarian creaturely freedom with full providential control by God. The aim of this paper is to explain, motivate, and defend a heretofore overlooked version of Molinism that I call 'Modest Molinism'. In Section 1, I explain Modest Molinism and make an initial case for it. Then, in Sections 2 and 3, I defend Modest Molinism against Dean Zimmerman's anti-Molinist argument, which is directed at all versions of Molinism, including Modest Molinism. Zimmerman's anti-Molinist argument combines two distinct and separable challenges to Molinism that I call the 'Irrelevance Objection' and the 'Extreme Manipulation Objection'. Despite the fact that Zimmerman intertwines these two objections, they require separate treatment. Thus, Section 2 will raise concerns about Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection and Section 3 will focus on concerns about Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection.

Keywords: Counterfactual of freedom, Free will, Middle knowledge, Molinism, Providence

The central claims of Molinism (named after Luis de Molina, a 16th century Spanish Jesuit thinker) are as follows:

M: God has full providential control of indeterministically free creaturely actions by means of middle knowledge. Middle knowledge includes knowledge of certain counterfactuals (or subjunctive conditionals) of freedom, which say what a particular creature would freely do in certain circumstances. On the basis of this knowledge, God decides whom to create and which circumstances to place them in, knowing what they would freely do in those circumstances. In this way, God can be in full control of which creaturely actions occur, despite their being free and undetermined.

There are various versions of Molinism, but each of them endorses M. By endorsing M, Molinism offers one of the most impressive and popular ways of combining libertarian creaturely freedom with full providential control by God.[1]

The aim of this paper is to explain, motivate, and defend a heretofore overlooked version of Molinism that I call 'Modest Molinism'. In Section 1 (which is by far the longest section of the paper), I explain Modest Molinism and make an initial case for it. Then, in Sections 2 and 3, I defend Modest Molinism against Dean Zimmerman's anti-Molinist argument, which is directed at M itself, and therefore at all versions of Molinism, including Modest Molinism.[2] Zimmerman's anti-Molinist argument combines two distinct and separable challenges to Molinism that I'll call the 'Irrelevance Objection' and the 'Extreme Manipulation Objection'. Despite the fact that Zimmerman intertwines these two objections, they require separate treatment. Thus, Section 2 will raise concerns about Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection and Section 3 will focus on concerns about Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection.[3]

1. Modest Molinism

The literature commonly takes for granted that Molinism endorses some additional theses (to be identified shortly) that I find doubtful, despite my friendliness to M. I will call the version of Molinism that endorses these additional theses 'Standard

---

[1] To say that God has "full providential control" over creaturely free actions is *not* to say that, for any possible creaturely free action, God can bring it about that that free action occurs. Rather, it's to say that (i) for any possible creaturely free action *that a creature would perform in circumstances that creature could be in*, God can bring it about that that free action occurs and (ii) God brings it about that the only creaturely free actions that ever occur are of the sort mentioned in (i).

[2] Zimmerman (2009) lays out his main objection to Molinism, Zimmerman (2011a) helpfully summarizes this objection, and Zimmerman (2011b) defends it and clarifies it in response to objections presented in Craig (2011). The reason for focusing on Zimmerman's objections (rather than others I might have addressed) is not that they target Modest Molinism in particular (they don't) or that Modest Molinism provides the most helpful resources for responding to them (it doesn't). It is, rather, that (a) as noted in the main text, Zimmerman's objections are aimed at *all* versions of Molinism, including Modest Molinism (so someone endorsing Modest Molinism will need a response to Zimmerman's objections), (b) Zimmerman's objections are recent, important, and under-discussed objections to Molinism from a prominent critic, and (c) this paper is part of a special issue of this journal in honor of Zimmerman.

[3] I'm very pleased to be contributing this paper to a special issue of this journal in honor of Dean Zimmerman. He is not only a good friend and former teacher of mine but also a fine example of an excellent philosopher (in his work and in his life)—an example that I aim, not very successfully I'm afraid, to emulate.

Molinism' and I'll distinguish it from a version of Molinisn that I find attractive—namely, Modest Molinism—which rejects endorsement of these additional theses. My goal in this section is to introduce and motivate Modest Molinism.

What is distinctive about Modest Molinism is that it accommodates (as Standard Molinism does not) two thoughts that I will explain further in Sections 1.3-1.6 but which can be stated succinctly as follows: (i) it is epistemically possible[4] that certain kinds of *centering* (with respect to subjunctive conditionals of freedom) are false and (ii) it is epistemically possible that certain *recombination principles* (concerning which subjunctive conditionals of freedom are metaphysically possible) are false.[5] Below I'll say more about which kinds of centering and which recombination principles I have in mind. For now, it's enough to know that Standard Molinism differs from Modest Molinism by endorsing at least some of these recombination principles and at least some of these kinds of centering in a way that doesn't fit well with saying that it's epistemically possible that they are all false. Perhaps it is best to think of Standard Molinism and Modest Molinism as stances: they each endorse a set of claims to be spelled out in Section 1.1; but Standard Molinism endorses some additional claims that Modest Molinism explicitly refrains from endorsing (when it says that it is epistemically possible that these claims are false).

1.1. Common Ground Between Standard Molinism and Modest Molinism

Generic Molinism, understood as M, is motivated in part by the ingenious way it allows religious thinkers to combine two important ideas embedded in the Christian tradition (and in other religious traditions as well): (a) that humans act freely in blameworthy ways and (b) that God has full providential control over all things, including the free creaturely actions just mentioned. Importantly, Molinism does

---

[4] As I'll be understanding epistemic possibility, p is epistemically possible (relative to X) if X doesn't know or reasonably believe that p is false. When I don't specify who X is, the assumption is that it consists of the person or persons endorsing the claim that p is epistemically possible. If a qualified and thorough investigator, doing research into whether p is true, endorses the claim that p is epistemically possible, it is common for that person to be doubtful that others know or reasonably believe that p is false while also acknowledging that there may be ways of determining the truth of about p to which others have access and she doesn't. Thus, an unqualified claim (in this paper) that *p is epistemically possible* should not be taken as an assertion that *no ordinary humans* know or reasonably believe that p.

[5] I will usually refer to conditionals of the form "if it were the case that p, it would be the case that q" (or "if it were the case that p, it *might* be the case that q") as 'subjunctive conditionals' rather than 'counterfactuals' because the latter term (unlike the former) suggests what is sometimes false, namely, that their antecedents aren't true.

this while endorsing a libertarian rather than a compatibilist view of freedom.[6] Both Standard Molinism and Modest Molinism are motivated in part by these considerations.

In addition, both Standard Molinism and Modest Molinism endorse the following four views. First, the subjunctive conditionals of freedom, of the sort that God knows via middle knowledge, are *contingent* propositions, not necessary ones. So they are contingently true (if known by God) or contingently false (if known by God to be false). Second, these subjunctive conditionals of creaturely freedom are not made true or false by God; nor are they, in all cases, made true or false by the creatures they're about, given that, according to Molinism, God's choice not to create a person can be due to God's knowledge of the subjunctive conditionals of freedom that are true of that person (or that person's individual essence).[7] Third, these subjunctive conditionals are (as Zimmerman says[8]) *brute*, in the sense that they aren't, as a rule, grounded in categorical (non-subjunctive) facts.[9] Fourth, as one would expect given the three points just mentioned, God was (as a matter of contingent fact, prior to creation) simply faced with the collection of subjunctive conditionals of creaturely freedom that are contingently true—they were the hand that God was dealt, so to speak, by no one in particular.

Molinism, as I'll be thinking of it in the remainder of this paper, endorses both M and the four additional views just mentioned above. Call this view 'M+'. Both Standard Molinism and Modest Molinism endorse M+. I don't deny that there may be views that endorse M but not M+ (giving them a potential claim to the name 'Molinism'). But I won't be discussing them further in this paper.

---

[6] Acts with libertarian freedom cannot be causally determined. Acts with compatibilist freedom (assuming there is such) can be causally determined. The libertarian view includes the thought that one's actions are neither free nor blameworthy if they are causally determined. See Zimmerman (2009, 34–8) for more detailed discussion of these and related points.

[7] Subjunctive conditionals of creaturely freedom about individual essences are of the form "If creaturely essence E's instantiation had libertarian freedom and were in circumstance C, E's instantiation would freely do action A".

[8] See Zimmerman (2009, 51 & 56) and (2011b, 163–6).

[9] I find plausible Trenton Merricks' view (2007, 146–69 and 2011, 67–71) that even though subjunctive conditionals of freedom lack truthmakers, their truth depends on the world. Thus, if a subjunctive conditional of creaturely freedom such as *If S were in C, S would freely do A* is true, we can correctly say that it is true *because* if S were in C, S would freely do A. That's the sense in which its truth depends on the world. But despite being dependent on the world in that sense, its truth is not grounded in categorical facts.

1.2. Subjunctive Conditionals and The Duality Thesis

In order to explain and defend Modest Molinism in Sections 1.3–1.6, it will be helpful first to say something about two different kinds of subjunctive conditionals and about what a view called 'the Duality Thesis' says concerning how they are related. Following David Lewis, let 'p □→ q' mean *if it were the case that p, then it would be the case that q*; and let 'p ◊→ q' mean *if it were the case that p, then it might be the case that q*. It can be helpful to think of p □→ q as saying that q is true in *all* the nearest possible worlds in which p is true (i.e., p-worlds). Likewise, it can be helpful to think of p ◊→ q as saying that q is true in *some* of the nearest p-worlds. Intuitively, if p is false, then p □→ q is true just in case changing the world *as little as possible* to make p true (this gives us the p-worlds nearest to the actual world) will result in worlds such that q is true in all of them. If q is true in some of these nearest p-worlds and false in others, then (i) both p ◊→ q and p ◊→ ~q are true and (ii) both p □→ q and p □→ ~q are false. There are difficult questions about what determines nearness of a world (and, relatedly, what it means to change the world as little as possible), which I will have to set aside here.[10]

This way of thinking of subjunctive conditionals—in terms of *all* of the nearest p-worlds or *some* of the nearest p-worlds—suggests that there are senses of would-SCs (i.e., would-subjunctive-conditionals such as p □→q) and might-SCs (i.e., might-subjunctive-conditionals such as p ◊→q) with respect to which the following Duality Thesis holds:

DT: (p ◊→ q) ≡ ~(p □→ ~q); and (p □→ q) ≡ ~(p ◊→ ~q).[11]

And, indeed, Modest Molinism says as much. That is, Modest Molinism says that DT captures *some senses* of would-CFs and might-CFs in ordinary English (which isn't to say that *all senses* of would-CFs and might-CFs in ordinary English are governed by DT). As will become clear in Section 1.3, this understanding of would-CFs, might-CFs, and the relation between them plays a role in explicating and motivating Modest Molinism.

---

[10] See Zimmerman (2009, 51) for some discussion. Note: this "nearness of worlds" talk, inspired by Lewis (1973) and Stalnaker (1968), is not (in this paper) to be interpreted as laying out the categorical grounds for the truth of subjunctive conditionals. Instead, it is a picturesque way of understanding what subjunctive conditionals are saying. For further discussion, see Zimmerman (2009, 55–56).

[11] See DeRose (1999, 408, n. 3) for some concerns that arise for DT if p is impossible and for a discussion of some ways of addressing these concerns.

But concerns have been raised about DT. David Lewis (1973) seemed to endorse the view that DT captures *every* sense of would-SCs and might-SCs in ordinary English. Some philosophers—including Keith DeRose (1999) and Trenton Merricks[12]—have objected to DT so understood. The main objection to DT is that there are cases where, intuitively, both p □→ q and p ◊→ ~q are true.[13] To deal with this difficulty for DT, DeRose (1999, 389–95) endorses in its place the epistemic thesis:

ET: (p ◊→ q) ≡ it's epistemically possible that (p □→ q).

DeRose (1999) defends ET against a number of competitors, including an ambiguity thesis later proposed by Lewis in his (1986), which DeRose calls 'AT'.[14] I want to endorse a different ambiguity thesis in place of DT, ET, and Lewis's AT, namely:

AT*: (p ◊→ q) has at least two senses, one governed by ET and one governed by DT.

AT* handles DeRose's objection to DT by allowing that some senses of might-SCs are governed by ET rather than DT.

AT* also handles another objection that DeRose mentions—one that applies to the alternatives to ET and DT that he considers. According to this objection, it *always sounds false* to assert one of the following two problematic conjunctions:

PC1: (p □→ q) & (p ◊→ ~q)
PC2: (p □→ ~q) & (p ◊→ q).

---

[12] In conversation, Merricks has raised objections to DT that are similar to those DeRose (1999) mentions, which involve cases where p □→ q can be true even though p ◊→ ~q is also true.

[13] DeRose (1999, 385) discusses such a case where p is "I tagged up" and q is "I scored the winning run":

> The score was tied in the bottom of the ninth, I was on third base, and there was only one out when Bubba hit a towering fly ball to deep left-center. Although I'm no speed-demon, the ball was hammered so far that I easily could have scored the winning run if I had tagged up. But I didn't. I got caught up in the excitement and stupidly played it half way, standing between third and home until I saw the center fielder make his spectacular catch, after which I had to return sheepishly to third. The next batter grounded me out, and we lost the game in extra innings.

According to DeRose, it's tempting to say both that *if I had tagged up, I would have scored the winning run* and also (given that if I had tagged up, I might have tripped, fallen, and been thrown out) that *if I had tagged up, I might not have scored the winning run*.

[14] I won't explain AT here. See DeRose (1999, 396–7) and Lewis (1986, 63–4) for details.

DT can easily explain why these sound false: they sound false because they *are* false. And as DeRose makes clear, ET can also explain why they sound false: they sound false (even when they are true) because in asserting the first conjunct of PC1 or PC2, one represents oneself as *knowing* that that first conjunct is true; and yet in each case, the second conjunct entails (according to ET) that one *doesn't know* that the first conjunct is true.[15] The other accounts of might-SCs considered in DeRose (1999), including Lewis's AT, fail to adequately handle this objection. But AT* handles it easily by saying that there are two senses of might-SCs and (in the ways just noted) each sense can explain why PC1 and PC2 sound false.

Moreover, AT* handles an objection to ET that DeRose (1999, 396–7) considers, where both of the following (uttered by a physicist) seem to be true and to involve *non-epistemic* mights:

> NE1: If the photon were emitted, it might have gone through the left slit.
> NE2: If the photon were emitted, it might not have gone through the left slit.

In order for ET to handle NE1 and NE2, DeRose has to finesse his account of epistemic possibility in a way that seems somewhat strained.[16] AT* handles them more straightforwardly by saying that these examples are governed by the DT sense of might-SCs.

Finally, it's very natural, in ordinary English, to explain the denial of a would-SC by affirming a might-not-SC, as follows: "it's false that *if it were the case that p, it would be the case that q*; after all, *if it were the case that p, it might be the case that ~q*". And it's very plausible to explain why this is natural by saying that there is a sense of might-SCs (and might-not-SCs) that is governed by DT.

Although I cannot take more time here to defend AT*, I believe I've said enough to make plausible the suggestion (offered in response to objections from DeRose) that *there is a sense* of might-SCs that is governed by DT. The defense given here of AT* should be sufficient for Modest Molinism to withstand the concerns raised by proposed counterexamples to DT.

---

[15] See DeRose (1999, 397–402) for more details.

[16] For more detailed discussion of the concerns about ET's handling of NE1 and NE2 and the way in which his account of epistemic possibility needs finessing, see DeRose (1999, 397–402).

1.3. Strong Centering, Restricted Centering, and Super-Restricted Centering

Let's turn now to the first of the two ways, alluded to in the second paragraph of Section 1, in which Modest Molinism differs from Standard Molinism (as I'm thinking of it[17])—namely, Modest Molinism's endorsement of the claim that *it's epistemically possible that certain kinds of centering (with respect to subjunctive conditionals) are false*. To state this idea more carefully, Modest Molinism says that:

> MM1: it's epistemically possible that Strong Centering, Restricted Centering, and Super-Restricted Centering are all false.

In the remainder of this section, I'll explain what these three kinds of centering are, why one might be inclined to endorse them, and why Modest Molinism says it's epistemically possible that all three are false.

Strong Centering is the view that:

> STR-C: $(p \,\&\, q)$ entails $(p \,\square\!\!\rightarrow q)$.

The idea behind STR-C is that no world can be as close to a world W as W is to itself.[18] Thus, if p and q are both true in the actual world, then the closest p-world is the actual world *alone*. And since q is also true in the actual world, q is true in *all* the closest p-worlds, in which case $p \,\square\!\!\rightarrow q$. That line of thought is what makes STR-C—endorsed, for example, by Lewis (1973, 28–29)—attractive to some.

But many philosophers object to STR-C. One reason to reject STR-C is that it supports the truth of would-SCs where the consequent seems completely irrelevant to the antecedent. The worry is that, according to STR-C, *any* true antecedent would-subjunctively implies *any* true consequent. But this seems implausible. For example, STR-C commits us to the following implausible would-SC, given that both its antecedent and consequent are true: if Marie Holmes were to win a Powerball lottery in February 2015, then Clinton would beat Sanders in the Iowa caucus in February

---

[17] In his (2011, 53 & 59–60), Merricks (a defender of Molinism) points out that both he and Hasker (an opponent of Molinism) think of Molinism as being committed to at least one of these kinds of centering. We can charitably think of these remarks as applying to what I'm calling 'Standard Molinism'. (It's worth keeping in mind that Hasker (2011) can coherently reject centering even if he thinks Molinism is committed to it, given that Hasker rejects Molinism).

[18] Strong Centering (STR-C) is sometimes contrasted with *weak* centering, which says that no world can be *closer* to a world W than W is to itself. Although I'll be considering objections to various kinds of centering, I won't be considering any objections to that sort of weak centering. (Note that STR-C is equivalent to what Merricks (2011) refers to simply as 'Centering'.)

2016 during the Democratic Party presidential primaries. Merricks (2011, 59–62) recommends that we handle this sort of "irrelevance" worry (at least for the purposes of discussing Molinism) by refraining from endorsing STR-C and endorsing in its place what he calls 'Restricted Centering':

> RC: If (p □→ q) is a subjunctive conditional of freedom where p states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled, then: (p & q) entails (p □→ q).

RC focuses on a subset of subjunctive conditionals: those that are SCFs (i.e., subjunctive conditionals of freedom) where—when both the antecedent and consequent are true—the antecedent states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled. Although Merricks doesn't offer a precise formula for determining when the antecedent of a conditional states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled, he insists that if the antecedent of an SCF states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled, this guarantees that the consequent is relevant to the antecedent. In this way, he side-steps the just-mentioned "irrelevance" worry about STR-C.

But there is another reason for rejecting STR-C, which is also a reason for rejecting RC. This reason offers what I'll call 'imprecision counterexamples' to STR-C. If these counterexamples succeed, they suggest that we should interpret nearness of worlds in such a way that STR-C is false. In particular, they suggest that we should say that a world W*, distinct from W, can be just as close to W—*for the purpose of assessing subjunctive conditionals*—as W is to itself. Zimmerman confesses (2009, 53) that he is attracted to this objection to STR-C. Here's an imprecision counterexample to STR-C that Zimmerman mentions (2009, 50–54)—one where p is 'the match is struck' and q is 'the match lights'. It's natural to suppose that (in conditions suitable for lighting a certain match) there are multiple particular ways one can strike that match (each of which is a standard way to strike that match). Some of those ways of striking the match would result in the match lighting and some would not. Thus, if 'the match is struck' means that the match is struck in one of the multiple (standard) ways it can be struck in suitable conditions, then the most we can truly say is that *if the match were struck, it might light* and also *if the match were struck, it might not light*. But we can't truly say that *if the match were struck, it would light*. And this is so even if the match is struck and it does light. In light of this imprecision counterexample (where the antecedent describes a set of circumstances less precisely rather than more precisely), we have reason to think STR-C is false.

This same problem arises for RC. For example, to use another scenario mentioned by Zimmerman (2009, 56–61), suppose p is 'Eve is tempted in a garden' and q is 'Eve freely gives in to temptation'. This seems to be a case like the match-lighting case, where we have an imprecision counterexample to RC, parallel to the imprecision counterexample to STR-C. Plausibly (from the Molinist perspective), there are many ways in which p (so understood) could be true; and for at least one of those ways, if p were true in that way, then q (so understood) would be true; likewise, for at least one *other* of those ways, if p were true in that other way, then ~q would be true. Thus, in the Eve example, we can't truly say that p □→ q or that p □→ ~q; instead, we can truly say that p ◊→ q and that p ◊→ ~q. Moreover, as in the match-lighting case, this is so even if p and q in the Eve example are true (and the antecedent states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled). Hence, contrary to what Merricks suggests, RC seems to be mistaken. It avoids the "irrelevance" worry but it doesn't avoid the worry due to imprecision counterexamples.[19]

But perhaps the spirit of RC can be preserved by turning to what I shall call 'Super-Restricted Centering'. In order to explain what Super-Restricted Centering is, we'll need to consider *precisified* SCFs. Intuitively, a precisified SCF will be the result of strengthening the antecedent of an SCF just enough to make it the case that the conjunction of its antecedent and consequent will (if possible) no longer be an imprecision counterexample to RC. For example, suppose again that p is 'Eve is tempted in a garden' and q is 'Eve freely gives in to temptation'. Then the conjunction of the antecedent and consequent of p □→ q will be an imprecision counterexample to RC if, even though p & q is true, both p ◊→q and p ◊→ ~q are true (and both p □→ q and p □→ ~q are false). But we can strengthen the antecedent of p □→ q by conjoining it with r (where p & r is a more precise description of Eve's circumstances than p alone is) with the hope that it is no longer the case that *both* the resulting might-SCF *and* the resulting might-not-SCF are true. That is, we can try to strengthen the antecedent in this way by choosing an r that is precise enough that it won't be the case that both (p & r) ◊→ q and (p & r) ◊→ ~q are true. Perhaps we can capture the basic idea here (at least approximately) as follows:

An SCF is a **precisified SCF** iff:

(i) it is a would-SCF of the form p □→ q;
(ii) it is contingent;

(iii) when both p and q are true, p states circumstances in which q is fulfilled; *and*

(iv) either:

    (a) p is just precise enough that p & q won't be an imprecision counterexample to RC;[20] *or*

    (b) if p can't be precise enough that p & q won't be an imprecision counterexample to RC while (i)-(iii) are true, then p is as precise as possible, consistent with (i)-(iii) being true.[21]

Note that, given clause (iv)(b), it's not ruled out by definition that the antecedent and consequent of a precisified SCF are together a counterexample to RC.

With this notion of a precisified SCF in mind, we can now say what Super-Restricted Centering is:

SUPER-RC: If $(p \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q)$ is a precisified SCF, then: (p & q) entails $(p \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q)$.[22]

---

[20] What does clause (iv)(a) mean when it says that "p is just precise enough that p & q won't be an imprecision counterexample to RC"? It means that p will be precise enough to achieve that goal but not too precise (i.e., it won't mention an irrelevant detail). To illustrate, consider Case A where q is 'Eve freely gives in to temptation,' p is logically equivalent to (r & s), r is 'Eve is tempted in the garden,' and s states a way in which r is true. In Case A, although both $r \;\lozenge\!\!\rightarrow q$ and $r \;\lozenge\!\!\rightarrow$ ~q are true, it's also the case that $(r \; \& \; s) \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q$ is true (in which case it's false that $(r \; \& \; s) \;\lozenge\!\!\rightarrow$ ~q). Case A is an example where p—which in this case is equivalent to (r & s)—is precise enough to keep p & q from being an imprecision counterexample to RC. To see a case where p is too precise, consider Case B where q and r and s are as they were in Case A but p is logically equivalent to (r & s & t) and t states a way in which (r & s) is true. In Case B, like in Case A, each of the following is true: $r \;\lozenge\!\!\rightarrow q$, $r \;\lozenge\!\!\rightarrow$ ~q, and $(r \; \& \; s) \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q$. But in addition, both $(r \; \& \; s \; \& \; t) \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q$ and $(r \; \& \; s \; \& \; \text{~}t) \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q$ are also true (because t is irrelevant to the truth of q). Case B is an example where p—which in this case is equivalent to (r & s & t)—is *too* precise because it mentions an irrelevant detail, namely, t. But if we clarify that, in both Case A and Case B, it is false that $(r \; \& \; \text{~}s) \;\square\!\!\rightarrow q$, then p as understood in case A—namely, as equivalent to (r & s)—is *not* too precise even though it is precise enough (to keep p & q from being an imprecision counterexample to RC).

[21] Note that clause (ii) implies that the antecedents of precisified SCFs won't *entail* their consequents (and that it is possible for the conjunction of the antecedent and consequent to be true) and clause (iii) guarantees that their antecedents aren't irrelevant to their consequents—at least not due to their failure to identify circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled. Finally, in connection with clause (iv), note that *making p as precise as possible* would make p more precise than *making p as precise as possible consistent with (i)-(iii) being true*. The latter, but not the former, prevents p from including things that (a) make p entail q or (b) keep p from counting as a circumstance in which q is fulfilled (when p and q are true).

[22] Note that SUPER-RC implies that the antecedent of condition (iv)(b), above, is never satisfied.

SUPER-RC aims to avoid the irrelevance worry in the same way RC does—i.e., by focusing only on SCFs where (when the antecedent and consequent are true) the antecedent states circumstances in which the consequent is fulfilled.[23] Moreover, because SUPER-RC (unlike RC) focuses on precisified SCFs, it proposes a way to avoid the imprecision counterexamples that caused trouble for RC. In effect, SUPER-RC says that *if an agent S freely does an action A, then there is some sufficiently precise description C of the circumstances in which S freely does A such that it is contingently true that (S is in C) □→ (S freely does A).*

Now, finally, we can say more clearly how Standard Molinism differs from Modest Molinism with respect to centering. Standard Molinism says that even if STR-C and RC are false, SUPER-RC is true. Modest Molinism refrains from asserting that SUPER-RC is true and says, instead, that *it's epistemically possible that each of STR-C, RC, and SUPER-RC is false.* To say that it's epistemically possible that SUPER-RC is false is to say it's epistemically possible that there can be cases where an agent S freely does an action A and yet there is no description C of the circumstances in which S freely does A such that it is contingently true that (S is in C) □→ (S freely does A).[24]

1.4. Molinism, Super-Restricted Centering, and Divine Perfection

But is the falsity of SUPER-RC compatible with Molinism? You might think not because Molinism says that God's full providential control of which free creaturely actions occur is made possible via God's middle knowledge of *would*-SCFs. God can't use knowledge of true *might*-SCFs to subjunctively guarantee that their consequents occur by making their antecedents true (because, being merely *might*-SCFs, their antecedents *don't* subjunctively guarantee their consequents). And if SUPER-RC is false, then God might be faced with true might-SCFs with antecedents that can't be made precise enough to turn them into true would-SCFs that are useful (via God's middle knowledge) for providential control of free creaturely actions.

But what matters isn't whether *all* true might-SCFs have antecedents that can be made precise enough to turn them into true would-SCFs. It is enough if *some* true might-SCFs have antecedents that can be made precise enough to turn them into contingently true would-SCFs. God could have full providential control of all free creaturely actions so long as God makes true the antecedents of true would-SCFs

---

[23] But see Section 2.2 for further discussion of irrelevance concerns.

[24] Notice that opponents of Molinism who deny that there are any true would-SCFs will say this about *every* case where an agent S freely does an action A.

and never makes true the antecedents of might-SCFs with antecedents that cannot be made precise enough to turn them into contingently true would-SCFs.

The previous paragraph takes care of the initial worry about the compatibility of Molinism and the falsity of SUPER-RC. But another worry arises. Suppose that God is a necessarily existing, necessarily perfect being and that divine perfection is to be understood in accord with the following principle:

> DP: if Molinism is possibly true, then divine perfection requires of necessity that God has full providential control over any free creaturely actions there are.

Then it seems there is good reason to conclude that SUPER-RC is true. For suppose p and q are true (where p states circumstances in which q—a proposition saying a creature freely performs a particular action—is fulfilled). Then, given that God is necessarily perfect (with perfection understood in accord with DP), $p \diamond\!\!\rightarrow q$ cannot be one of those true might-SCFs that can't be turned into a contingently true would-SCF by making its antecedent more precise. For God wouldn't make true an antecedent of that sort, given that doing so would prevent God from having the full providential control of all free creaturely actions that perfection (understood in accord with DP) requires. Hence, if p and q (understood as just noted) are true, there is some p* that is a way of making p more precise and is such that $p^* \square\!\!\rightarrow q$ is contingently true. But this is just to say that SUPER-RC is true. In short, given the understanding of divine perfection laid out in DP, SUPER-RC is true if Molinism is true, which means that, given DP, Molinism is incompatible with the falsity of SUPER-RC.

The conclusion of the previous paragraph seems correct. But Modest Molinism can still be right in saying that it's epistemically possible that SUPER-RC is false so long as it also says it's epistemically possible that DP is false. And it does say that. In particular, it says that it's epistemically possible that (i) depending on which would- and might-SCFs are true, God could have a genuine choice between having full providential control of all free creaturely actions and not having such control and that (ii) *each of these two choices is compatible with divine perfection.* That is, God might choose to have full providential control over such actions by making true the antecedents of *only* those true might-SCFs that can be turned into contingently true would-SCFs by making their antecedents more precise (and by making those more precise antecedents true as well). Or God might choose to forego having full providential control of such actions by making true the antecedents of some true might-SCFs that cannot be turned into contingently true would-SCFs by making

their antecedents more precise. According to Modest Molinism, it's epistemically possible that either option is consistent with divine perfection (in which case, it's epistemically possible that DP is false).[25] This is enough to address the worry about Molinism and SUPER-RC that was raised in the previous paragraph.

1.5. Recombination Principles and Plantinga's Free Will Defense

We've seen what Modest Molinism (in endorsing MM1) says about centering—namely, that it's epistemically possible that STR-C, RC, and SUPER-RC are all false (whereas Standard Molinism insists that at least SUPER-RC is true). Let's turn next to a consideration of what Modest Molinism says about recombination principles.

We can start with Plantinga's Free Will Defense (FWD) and its appeal to transworld depravity—more particularly, to:

⟡TD: Possibly, every (free) creaturely essence is transworld depraved.

⟡TD is relevant to the recombination principles connected with Standard Molinism because it is commonly supposed that (a) Molinists will endorse Plantinga's FWD and, therefore, ⟡TD and that (b) these endorsements take for granted certain recombination principles about SCFs. What is transworld depravity? It involves an SCF-profile. According to Molinism, for each essence E of a free creature, there is an SCF-profile, which is a list of all the contingently true SCFs saying what the instantiation of E would (or might) freely do if it were in certain circumstances. Such an essence E is transworld depraved if, given the full SCF-profile contingently true of it, God cannot guarantee that E is instantiated (with creaturely freedom to perform morally significant actions) in such a way that it would never do what is morally wrong.[26]

Plantinga (1974, 186) says that "clearly it is possible that everybody suffers from transworld depravity". Why think this is clearly possible? It seems to be motivated by a recombination principle saying something like the following:

---

[25] Thus, according to Modest Molinism, it's epistemically possible that divine perfection doesn't require that God has full providential control over the actions of free creatures, even if it is possible for God to have this sort of control.

[26] See Plantinga (1974, 186) for his way of explaining what transworld depravity is. The account of transworld depravity that I've given in the main text is intended to be faithful to Plantinga's account.

RECOMB: (i) *Individual SCF-profiles:* For every free creaturely essence E, every action A that E's instantiation could freely do or refrain from doing, and every circumstance C that could be a relevant[27] circumstance in which E's instantiation freely does A or refrains from doing A, there is

- a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely does A" is true and a possible world in which it is false,
- a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely refrains from A" is true and a possible world in which it is false.

(ii) *Combining the SCF-profiles of All Individuals:* Consider each would-SCF and each denial thereof that—according to clause (i) of RECOMB—could appear on the SCF-profile of a creaturely essence E in some world or other. Then consider all combinations of those would-SCFs (and denials thereof) for a particular essence that aren't ruled out by DT. Finally, consider all such combinations for each creaturely essence. Every way of combining DT-permissible combinations for one creaturely essence with DT-permissible combinations for each of the other creaturely essences is actual in some possible world.

Zimmerman (2009, 70–2) assumes both that Plantinga takes RECOMB for granted and that his endorsement of Molinism gives him a reason to do so. And Molinists who take RECOMB for granted will, thereby, have a good reason to endorse ◊TD. For if all the recombinations of SCF-profiles for creaturely essences are possible, then there is some world in which the recombination mentioned in ◊TD is actual.

Perhaps Zimmerman is right that Standard Molinism endorses RECOMB. But there are reasons to be concerned about RECOMB, and Modest Molinism is motivated by these reasons. First, RECOMB doesn't explicitly allow that recombinations of both would-SCFs *and* might-SCFs for all creaturely essences are possible.[28] In particular, it doesn't explicitly allow that there are possible worlds in which the following are jointly true of some essence E:

- ~(E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely does A);
- ~(E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely refrains from A);
- E's instantiation is in C ◊→ E's instantiation freely does A;
- E's instantiation is in C ◊→ E's instantiation freely refrains from A;

---

[27] What counts as a circumstance that could be relevant? I will address this question below in Section 2.2.

[28] Although, given DT, every would-SCF entails a might-SCF with the same antecedent and consequent.

This first concern could easily be addressed by replacing RECOMB with RECOMB*, which alters both clauses of RECOMB as follows (changes from RECOMB are in bold):

> RECOMB*: (i) *Individual SCF-profiles:* For every free creaturely essence E, every action A that E's instantiation could freely do or refrain from doing, and every circumstance C that could be a relevant circumstance in which E's instantiation freely does A or refrains from doing A, there is
> - a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely does A" is true and a possible world in which it is false,
> - a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C □→ E's instantiation freely refrains from A" is true and a possible world in which it is false.
> - **a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C ◊→ E's instantiation *freely does* A" is true and a possible world in which it is false,**
> - **a possible world in which "E's instantiation is in C ◊→ E's instantiation *freely refrains* from A" is true and a possible world in which it is false.**
>
> (ii) *Combining the SCF-profiles of All Individuals:* Consider each would- **and each might-**SCF and each denial thereof that—according to clause (i) of **RECOMB***—could appear on the SCF-profile of a creaturely essence E in some world or other. Then consider all combinations of those would- **and might-**SCFs (and denials thereof) for a particular essence that aren't ruled out by DT. Finally, consider all such combinations for each creaturely essence. Every way of combining DT-permissible combinations for one creaturely essence with DT-permissible combinations for each of the other creaturely essences is actual in some possible world.[29]

But there is a second concern about RECOMB that also applies to RECOMB*.

This second concern questions whether *all* the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB (and RECOMB*) are in fact metaphysical possibilities. The main reason for endorsing RECOMB (and RECOMB*) is that we don't have compelling reasons to think, of any particular recombinations they mention, that they aren't metaphysical possibilities. Modest Molinists grant this, but they insist that this is different from seeing that all the recombinations are in fact metaphysical

---

[29] At least some of the alterations in RECOMB* that appear at the end of clause (i) are already implicitly included in RECOMB, given that p □→ q implies p ◊→ q and that the equivalences mentioned in DT capture the sense of the SCFs under discussion.

possibilities. Given that we can't see that all recombinations are metaphysically possible, Modest Molinism says that:

> MM2: it's epistemically possible that some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB and some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB* aren't metaphysical possibilities.

DeRose (1991, 509–11), Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder (1998, 8–13), and Bergmann (1999, 343–5) all, in different ways, press this point. In the interest of space, I won't restate what those articles say on this score; I'll simply direct the reader to those three articles.[30]

It's no surprise that those three articles all, in their different ways, also raise objections to Plantinga's FWD—and, in particular, to Plantinga's reliance on ◊TD. If, as Zimmerman says, ◊TD is supported by RECOMB (and by RECOMB*), then having doubts about both RECOMB and RECOMB* can lead to doubts about ◊TD. It's no surprise, therefore, that Modest Molinism, which shares these doubts about both RECOMB and RECOMB*, also shares these doubts about ◊TD. Zimmerman (2009, 47 & 72) seems to think that any true Molinist will be committed to ◊TD and to its role in Plantinga's FWD. But, while that may be true of Standard Molinists, it isn't true of Modest Molinists.

1.6. Conclusion on Modest Molinism

Modest Molinism counts as Molinism insofar as it, like Standard Molinism, endorses M+ (from Section 1.1); and it's "modest" insofar as it endorses these two theses:

> MM1: it's epistemically possible that STR-C, RC, and SUPER-RC are all false.
> MM2: it's epistemically possible that some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB and some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB* aren't metaphysical possibilities.

The motivation for endorsing MM1 and MM2 is that doing so enables Modest Molinists to explicitly refrain from making commitments that we have reason not to make. In particular, Modest Molinism isn't committed to the truth of centering (understood as the claim that either STR-C, RC, or SUPER-RC is true) and it isn't

---

[30] Craig (2011) also mentions this point in response to Zimmerman (2009), citing and discussing Bergmann (1999) and Howard-Snyder and Hawthorne (1998) in support of it.

committed to saying all of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB or in RECOMB* are metaphysical possibilities. Nor is it committed to the *falsity* of centering (so understood) or to saying that some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB and RECOMB* are *not* metaphysical possibilities. By avoiding such commitments, Modest Molinism is a more attractive stance than Standard Molinism.

Why think that Modest Molinism is true? First, one might think that Christianity is true based on evidence of the sort highlighted by Plantinga in his (2000, 182–3 & 249–52)—evidence such as religious seemings that confirm the truth and trustworthiness of scriptural and church teaching and that one takes to be produced by the Holy Spirit.[31] Second, Christian teaching strongly suggests both that we are free and that God has providential control of all things. Third, unless it's subject to objections that theists should find compelling (in my view, it isn't), Molinism seems to capture these two claims (i.e., that we're free and that God has full providential control) in a more plausible way than either of the two main alternatives, namely, Open Theism and Calvinism.[32] Lastly, given that MM1 and MM2 have their own appeal (discussed above) and are compatible with Molinism, Modest Molinism is an attractive option for someone already inclined toward Molinism. In light of these considerations, even someone who didn't wholeheartedly endorse Modest Molinism might be inclined to think that it, or some as yet unrecognized approach that shares Modest Molinism's advantages, is true. Notice that the endorsement of Christianity mentioned in the first point in this paragraph is based on what is taken to be divine revelation (via the Holy Spirit) rather than on philosophical intuition regarding esoteric matters. Modest Molinists are skeptical enough about such intuition to find MM1 and MM2 attractive. But this skepticism needn't lead them to give up their revelation-based acceptance of Christianity or their preference for the Molinist way of making sense of Christian teaching on free will and divine providence.

---

[31] It's best to read those pages just cited from Plantinga (2000) in light of chapters 6 and 8 (as well as other parts) of Plantinga (2000), to get the full picture.

[32] Calvinism, insofar as it endorses compatibilism, does worse than Molinism at capturing the view that we're free. And Open Theism does worse than Molinism at capturing a strong view of divine providence. For brief and helpful summaries of Calvinism and Open Theism, see Zimmerman (2009, 33–48). See also Flint (2009).

2. Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection

2.1. Two Objections Mixed Together

Let's turn to a consideration of Zimmerman's main argument against Molinism, which (if successful) works against Modest Molinism as well. This argument is a souped-up version of the Standard Manipulation Objection to Molinism:

> *Standard Manipulation Objection*: (a) It's uncontroversial that Molinism claims that God has full providential control over all creaturely actions as follows: via God's middle knowledge, God knows what such creatures would do in certain circumstances; so God creates (some of) them and puts them in those circumstances, thereby knowingly bringing it about that they behave as God chooses. (b) This amounts to manipulation of creaturely actions by God and (c) it prevents those actions from being genuinely free, contrary to the claims of Molinism.[33]

This Standard Manipulation Objection to Molinism is raised by William Hasker (1990, 123–4) and (1992, 100–101)) and Nick Trakakis (2006, section 5.2).[34] Zimmerman takes the Standard Manipulation Objection and soups it up in two ways. *First*, he soups it up by saying that the Molinist is committed to thinking that it's (metaphysically) possible that very minor and *seemingly irrelevant* changes in the world can be used to subjunctively guarantee that a creature would freely do one thing rather than another.[35] In effect, it's possible that the SCF-profiles true of a free creature S are such that God can manipulate S (in the way described by the Standard Manipulation Objection) by making minor and seemingly irrelevant changes in the

---

[33] Note: in (a), this objection highlights what is obviously a tenet of Molinism (i.e., that God has full providential control of all creaturely actions); in (b), this objection labels this feature as 'manipulation'; and in (c), this objection claims that such manipulation prevents creaturely actions from being genuinely free. There's nothing new highlighted in (a); it's just a statement of what Molinism obviously says. And the labeling in (b) is a very natural (even if questionable) thought about the feature of Molinism highlighted in (a), which is why it's such a natural objection to make. But what's most needed and significant for this objection, if it is to be successful, is a defense of the claim in (c).

[34] Hasker (1992, 100–101) finds inspiration for this objection in Alston (1985, 8–10), although Alston doesn't specifically mention that Molinism is his target.

[35] Zimmerman (2009, 59–65). This counts as "souping up" the objection because it says the Molinist is committed to even more implausibilities.

world.[36] *Second*, he soups up the objection further by saying that the Molinist is committed to thinking that it's possible not only that all actual free creaturely actions are under God's control but, in addition, that every possible action A open at any time to any possible creature is such that God can bring A about via seemingly irrelevant changes of the sort mentioned above.[37] Zimmerman then argues that the Molinist's commitment to the possibility of this doubly souped-up sort of manipulation—where God is able to use seemingly irrelevant changes in the world to control all possible actions of all possible creatures—is even more obviously objectionable than the manipulation highlighted by the Standard Manipulation Objection.[38] The upshot is that the Molinist's commitment to the *possibility* of souped-up manipulation causes a new and serious problem for Molinism.[39]

---

[36] This is so because it's possible that seemingly irrelevant changes in the world (e.g., from X to Y) can be important for a creature S in virtue of the fact that both of the following SCFs are included in the SCF-profile for S: "X $\square\rightarrow$ S freely does A1" and "Y $\square\rightarrow$ S freely does A2" (where A1 and A2 are distinct and incompatible actions).

[37] Zimmerman (2009, 67–75).

[38] Zimmerman (2009, 75–81).

[39] In his (2009, 82–4), when Zimmerman initially presented this objection, he considered a way for the Molinist to sidestep this souped-up version of the Standard Manipulation Objection—namely, by granting that this souped-up manipulation would conflict with creaturely freedom and saying that if God faced the possibility where souped-up manipulation was an option, God would be unable to create free creatures. Zimmerman responded to this sidestep maneuver by saying that the possibility of this sort of divine limitation would be a difficult pill for the Molinist to swallow. Later, in his (2011b, 173–6), Zimmerman retracts that response (realizing that Molinists might not find that sort of divine limitation so objectionable—since it's just another one of the limitations that Molinists already think God might contingently face, depending on which SCF-profiles of creaturely essences he is dealt). But then Zimmerman insists that, given their views, Molinists should not sidestep, in this way, his souped-up version of that Standard Manipulation Objection. So I will ignore the details of Zimmerman's discussion of that way the Molinist could sidestep the souped-up version of the Standard Manipulation Objection and Zimmerman's response to that sidestep maneuver.

However, it's worth noting that an objection similar to Zimmerman's retracted response to the sidestep maneuver arises for Modest Molinism. By emphasizing MM1, Modest Molinists allow that it's epistemically possible that there's a possible world in which God has no control over any possible actions of any possible free creatures—this would be the case if the SCF profiles of all creaturely essences were contingently such that they included no precisified would-SCFs true of any of them. (The Modest Molinist endorsement of MM2 keeps Modest Molinists from being *committed* to there being such a possibility. But it doesn't prevent them from saying this possible world is epistemically possible.) Is it a problem for Modest Molinism to say that it is epistemically possible that God could be limited in this way? I think not. The same reasons (alluded to in the previous paragraph in this note) that persuade Zimmerman to retract his response to the sidestep maneuver are also good reasons to think the objection to Modest Molinism considered in this paragraph fails.

Zimmerman's main anti-Molinist argument, described in the previous paragraph, intertwines two separable objections to Molinism, each of which raises a different complaint. The first is the Irrelevance Objection, which has to do with the first way Zimmerman soups up the Standard Manipulation Objection:

> *Irrelevance Objection:* Molinism is committed to the possibility that God's Molinist-style control of free creaturely actions can occur via direct manipulation of seemingly irrelevant states of the world (i.e., seemingly irrelevant to the creaturely actions that are being controlled thereby). It is highly implausible that God can indirectly manipulate free creaturely actions in this way (i.e., via direct manipulation of seemingly irrelevant states of the world).

The second is the Extreme Manipulation Objection, which has to do with the second way Zimmerman soups up the Standard Manipulation Objection:

> *Extreme Manipulation Objection*: Molinism is committed to the possibility that God's ability to have Molinist-style control of free creaturely actions extends to every possible action of every possible free creature. It is highly implausible that any creaturely actions are genuinely free if it's possible that all possible actions of all possible creatures are subject to this kind of (manipulative) control.

In Section 2.2, I will respond to the Irrelevance Objection. In Section 3 I will respond to the Extreme Manipulation Objection.

2.2. The Irrelevance Objection

Zimmerman's favorite example for pressing what I'm calling 'the Irrelevance Objection' involves cosmic specks of dust that exist in a space-time before the Big Bang, where the specks can be arranged in an infinite variety of distinct spatiotemporal patterns.[40] To understand this objection, consider the following case involving a creature S, an action A1 that S could perform, a circumstance C in which S could perform A1, and the following subjunctive conditional of freedom:

---

[40] Zimmerman introduces this example in his (2009, 61) and in his (2011a, 141) he says it's his favorite example for these purposes. In what follows in the main text, I give my own presentation of his example, but it's intended to accurately capture Zimmerman's description.

SCF1: S is in C □→ S freely does A1.

Suppose that, when the antecedent and consequent of SCF1 are true, the antecedent describes what counts as a circumstance in which the consequent is fulfilled. But suppose also that, although C is fairly precise, it isn't precise enough to avoid imprecision counterexamples—i.e., suppose that SCF1 is false and that both of the following are true:

SCF2: S is in C ◊→ S freely does A1;
SCF3: S is in C ◊→ ~(S freely does A1).

Finally, suppose that G is a particular group of pre-Big-Bang cosmic specks of dust, that P1 says the dust specks in G are in one particular spatiotemporal pattern, that P2 says the dust specks in G are in a different particular spatiotemporal pattern, and that A2 is another possible action S could perform (one that is incompatible with performing A1). Zimmerman says that Molinists are *committed to the possibility* of a case just like this where these two SCFs are true:

SCF4: (P1 is true & S is in C) □→ S freely does A1;
SCF5: (P2 is true & S is in C) □→ S freely does A2.

and these two SCFs are false:

SCF6: (P1 is false & S is in C) □→ S freely does A1;
SCF7: (P2 is false & S is in C) □→ S freely does A2.[41]

In this case as I've described it, if God were to place S in C, then (using his middle knowledge) God could get S to freely do A1 by arranging the dust specks in G in one way, and God could get S to freely do a different act, A2, by arranging the dust specks in G in a different way. In fact, Zimmerman says that Molinists are committed not only to the possibility of this sort of case, but also to there being a possible world where God, via his middle knowledge, has control (in this pre-Big-Bang dust-pattern arrangement way) over every possible free action of every possible free creature. Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection says that Molinism is problematic because it is committed to the *implausible* view that there is such a possible world.

---

[41] The falsity of SCF1, SCF6, and SCF7 together clarify that the truth of SCF4 and SCF5 allows for God's middle-knowledge-based control (via pre-Big-Bang dust-pattern arrangements) of whether S freely does A1 or A2.

What's crucial for this objection to succeed is that it strikes us that the would-SCFs in the example are highly implausible—in particular, it's implausible that SCF4 and SCF5 are true (while SCF 1, SCF6, and SCF7 are all false). The reason this strikes us as implausible is that the arrangements of pre-Big-Bang cosmic dust particles *seem irrelevant* to what any free creature in our post-Big-Bang space-time would freely do. But that very intuition (i.e., that those arrangements of dust particles are irrelevant to what we would freely do) provides the basis for a response to the Irrelevance Objection. We have already considered the importance of focusing (for purposes of determining which known-by-God SCFs are relevant for God's providential control of free creaturely actions) on would-SCFs that (i) have antecedents stating the circumstance in which their consequents (reporting a free creaturely action) are fulfilled and (ii) are *precisified SCFs*—i.e., ones where the antecedent is specific enough that we get a contingently true would-SCF concerning the action mentioned in the consequent, but not so specific that it includes irrelevancies. Let's focus on such precisified would-SCFs and consider whether their antecedents could include claims about specific patterns of pre-Big-Bang cosmic dust. The problem is that if the antecedent of a would-SCF about a free human action did mention the patterns of such dust, it's natural to think that the dust pattern part of the antecedent (e.g., P1 from the previous paragraph) is irrelevant. For example, suppose SCF4 is true—i.e., that (P1 & S is in C) $\Box\rightarrow$ S freely does A1. Since it's natural to think that the dust-pattern part of the antecedent (i.e., P1) is irrelevant, it's also natural to think that SCF6 is also true—i.e., that (~P1 & S is in C) $\Box\rightarrow$ S freely does A1. That's what we'd expect if P1 were irrelevant to whether S would freely do A1. But the Irrelevance Objection says that the Molinist is committed to the implausible view that it's possible that pre-Big-Bang dust patterns *are* relevant to what we would freely do— i.e., that SCF4 is true and SCF6 is false. How can the Molinist avoid this problematic commitment?

The Molinist can avoid this by saying that a circumstance C is relevant to what someone would freely do only if C is, or can affect, an *input* to that free choice, where an input to a free choice is some part of the agent's mental states.[42] The thought is that an agent makes free choices in light of (but not causally determined by) her mental states. If we think that something cannot have an effect on the agent's mental states (which is what we think of the pre-Big-Bang cosmic dust), we think it is

---

[42] The agent's mental states can include nonconscious (e.g., unconscious or subconscious) mental states as well as conscious mental states. Can inputs to free choices include things that are not a part of the agent's mental states—e.g., states of the agent's body (or soul) that don't count as mental states? If so, then what I say in this paragraph and the next can easily be modified to accommodate that, without resulting in a significant change to my response to the Irrelevance Objection.

irrelevant to what she would freely do. But if it can have an effect on the agent's mental states, we think it *may* be relevant to what she would freely do. With this in mind, the Molinist (whether Standard or Modest) can endorse the following principle:

> *Molinist Relevance Requirement (MRR)*: God's middle-knowledge-based control of what an agent S freely does cannot work via God's direct manipulation of states of the world that are irrelevant to what S would freely do. And a state of the world is irrelevant to what S would freely do if it is distinct from and has no effect on S's mental states.[43]

If MRR is true and can be consistently endorsed by Molinists, then Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection fails. For Molinists (Standard or Modest) who endorse MRR are *not* committed to allowing for the possibility that God can indirectly manipulate free creaturely actions via direct manipulation of irrelevant states of the world such as patterns of pre-Big-Bang cosmic dust particles.

Zimmerman seems to think (2009, 60–65) that Molinists are committed to saying that a principle such as MRR must be false. After all, he says, Molinists deny that the grounds for SCFs are categorical facts (such as facts with an effect on S's mental states) in the vicinity of the free choice mentioned in the consequent of the SCF. But endorsement of MRR doesn't say that *the grounds* for SCFs are categorical facts about what has an effect on S's mental states. One can endorse MRR and Molinism (Standard or Modest) while also thinking that SCFs have no grounds at all. An MRR-

---

[43] To say that "God's middle-knowledge-based control of what a creature S freely does cannot work via God's manipulation of things that are irrelevant to what S freely does" isn't to say that "if God has complete control over everything that is relevant to what S freely does, then God can exercise middle-knowledge-based control over what S freely does". This is because something X can be *relevant* to what S freely does even if, due to the SCF-profile for S, God is unable to exercise middle-knowledge-based control of S via manipulation of X.

Can God's middle-knowledge-based control of what S freely does occur by way of manipulating events in the remote causal history of S's mental states—for example, by way of manipulating the way that the Big Bang occurs? That's difficult to say. It's hard to imagine that minor tweaks in the way the Big Bang occurs could usefully affect S's mental states in the sense that the Big Bang occurring one way would put S in one mental state at t (14 billion years after the Big Bang) and the Big Bang occurring another way would put S in a different mental state at t. It's more plausible that (i) even the slightest tweaks to the way the Big Bang occurred would make it so that S never existed and that (ii) variations in more proximate events in the causal history of S's mental states—all of which are (given both physics-based and human-freedom-based indeterminism) compatible with the Big Bang occurring in just the way it did—are more likely to be useful in manipulating S's mental states.

endorsing Molinist can follow Merricks (2011) in saying that true SCFs are groundless, even though their truth depends on the world in the following sort of way: "S is in C $\square\!\!\rightarrow$ S freely does A" is true because if S were in C, S would freely do A. MRR tells us that what matters, for the antecedent-circumstances' *relevance* to the consequent of an SCF, is whether those circumstances are (or can have an effect on) the mental states of the person that the consequent says is acting freely. But identifying what makes the antecedent-circumstances relevant to the consequent of an SCF is *not the same thing as* identifying what grounds the truth of the SCF in question. Hence, Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection fails.

3. Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection

But even if Zimmerman's Irrelevance Objection fails, that won't affect either the Standard Manipulation Objection or the Extreme Manipulation Objection to Molinism. It's true that Zimmerman develops his examples of extreme manipulation by saying God has Molinist-style indirect control of creaturely actions by means of direct control of *irrelevant* patterns of cosmic dust. But similar examples could also be developed by saying, instead, that God's Molinist-style indirect control of creaturely actions occurs by means of direct control of *relevant* states of the world (e.g., states of the world that MRR will allow are relevant to the consequents of would-SCFs). In this way, the Extreme Manipulation Objection could be defended even by someone who concedes that the Irrelevance Objection fails. (So, in a way, the Irrelevance Objection is *irrelevant* to the force and importance of the Extreme Manipulation Objection.)

Before laying out my own responses to the Extreme Manipulation Objection, it's worth highlighting the reply to it that Tom Flint gives and Zimmerman anticipates, because I think this reply is exactly right and extremely important. As Flint (2015) says:

> worlds . . . where every possible creature is transworldly manipulable . . . might indeed pose an embarrassment to Molinism if the transworld manipulability of a creature were inconsistent with that creature's freedom. But Zimmerman offers no argument for the claim that the two are inconsistent—and he himself admits (in effect) that he has no argument for the claim.[44]

What Zimmerman says (2009, 81) is:

---

[44] See the text in Flint (2015) to which his note 21 is attached (and the paragraph in which his note 21 is included).

> The Molinist response I have most often heard to my argument is simply to 'stare me down' at this point. I can be under the complete control of another person—that is, I can place no limits upon his freedom to decide what I will decide—and yet I can be perfectly free (even in the libertarian's robust sense of the term, as opposed to some watered-down, compatibilistic surrogate for 'free'). I am tempted to respond to this claim by alleging that being free analytically entails not being under the complete control of another. I do not see how to prove this.

Since he doesn't know how to prove it, Zimmerman tells stories that he hopes will persuade his readers that he's right in thinking that being free analytically entails not being under the complete control of another. But Flint's response to these stories strikes me as exactly right:

> none of these stories . . . should move a Molinist, or anyone who is well informed but genuinely undecided in the debate over providence.[45]

Moreover, as Flint emphasizes and Zimmerman realizes, Molinists think that, although God is powerless regarding which SCFs are true of us, we are not. Suppose it's true that "if Bergmann were in C, Bergmann would freely do A" and that I in fact freely do A in C. Then, since I *freely* do A in C, I am able to refrain from doing A in C. And if I did refrain, that SCF would be false. So I have power both over the action A and over the truth of that SCF.[46] This counts in support of the Molinist claim that our actions can be free even if SCFs about those actions of ours are true and used by God to have full providential control over what we freely do. So it counts against the claim that being free analytically entails not being under the control of another. These complaints by Flint against Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection are, in my view, highly plausible and they are the background for what I say below.

---

[45] This appears in Flint (2015) immediately after the sentence to which his note 22 is attached.

[46] See Flint (2015), in the paragraph in which note 5 appears. As Flint (2015) emphasizes (see his note 5), this power to make an SCF false applies only to SCFs with true antecedents. Zimmerman (2009, 80) recognizes all this and even grants it for the sake of argument.

A qualification: Modest Molinists (because they think it's epistemically possible that even SUPER-RC is false) will reject the view of Merricks (2011, 64) that I can make *true* the would-SCF about me (the one mentioned in the main text) simply by doing A in C (because that would make it true only that "if Bergmann were in C, Bergmann *might* freely do A"). But, given that DT (from Section 1.2) applies to the would- and might-SCFs under discussion here, Modest Molinists will think I can make *false* this would-SCF by refraining from doing A in C.

Turning now to *my* reply to Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection, I will make four points.[47] The first is that, given MM2,[48] the Modest Molinist can say that it is epistemically possible that Transworld Manipulability (i.e., the claim that all possible actions of all possible free creatures are manipulable by God) is not possible—i.e., it's epistemically possible that ◊TM (the claim that Transworld Manipulability is possible) is false. This is akin to saying it's epistemically possible that ◊TD is false, which is what the Modest Molinist does say. Zimmerman himself seems to think (2009, 67) that if a Molinist accepts ◊TD, that Molinist should also accept ◊TM. Similar reasoning should lead him to allow that a Modest Molinist who thinks it's epistemically possible that ~◊TD may also, for similar reasons, think it's epistemically possible that ~◊TM. This point against Zimmerman is, perhaps, of limited import because the Modest Molinist may concede that it's also epistemically possible that both ◊TD and ◊TM are true. And Zimmerman can, perhaps, work with that concession to press a revised objection, similar to the Extreme Manipulation Objection, that focuses not on metaphysical possibilities to which the Molinist is committed but on metaphysical possibilities that the Molinist will allow are epistemically possible.

The second point of my reply is that it's difficult to see how extreme manipulation of free actions is any more implausible than standard manipulation of free actions. That is, it would be strange if (i) one's actions *couldn't be free* if all possible free creatures were afflicted with transworld manipulability—i.e. if all possible actions of all possible creatures were under God's control (this is extreme manipulation)[49] and yet (ii) one's actions *could be free* if all actual creaturely free actions were under God's control (this is standard manipulation).[50] Zimmerman seems to agree. He discusses what some Christians believe is an actual case of divine control of a free action, in which a man gives Jesus a donkey to ride on Palm Sunday: in the Luke 19 story, Jesus seems to know that this man will freely give up the donkey if the

---

[47] Only the first point is from a distinctly Modest Molinist perspective. The other three points can be offered by both Standard Molinists and Modest Molinists.

[48] As a reminder, MM2 says: it's epistemically possible that some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB and some of the recombinations mentioned in RECOMB* aren't metaphysical possibilities.

[49] This is the kind of manipulation that Zimmerman envisages as a possibility when he presses the Extreme Manipulation Objection.

[50] I call it 'standard manipulation' because it's the sort of "manipulation" that is obviously endorsed by all Molinists (i.e., it's the sort of manipulation that others—such as Hasker and Trakakis—were talking about when they pressed the Standard Manipulation Objection, discussed in Section 2.1).

disciples say to the man what Jesus told them to say, namely, "The Lord has need of it". About this example, Zimmerman (2011b, 175) says:

> If the transworld manipulable person is not free, then the man with the donkey is not free either; if the latter is free, as the Molinist believes, then so is the person afflicted with transworld manipulability.

Just so. Zimmerman seems to expect his readers to be persuaded—by his stories in his (2009)—that the person afflicted with transworld manipulability isn't free, in which case the man with the donkey isn't free either. My inclination is to think that the man with the donkey is free, so the person afflicted with transworld manipulability is too. Perhaps what's most important here is that, in saying these things, even Zimmerman seems to concede that his Extreme Manipulation Objection has no more force against Molinism than does the Standard Manipulation Objection, with which Molinists have long been familiar.

Third, the word 'manipulation' often or always has negative connotations having to do with nefarious motives of the manipulator that involve harm to and lack of appropriate respect towards those who are manipulated. But if we stipulate a meaning of 'manipulation' according to which God's having control via middle knowledge of what we freely do is sufficient for God's behavior toward us to count as manipulation, then there is no reason to import these negative connotations. Insofar as it's a good thing for God to have full providential control of all things, this sort of manipulation is a good thing: it manifests God's greatness and (if we know about it) it assures us that all things will work out well, in the end, while also preserving (according to Molinism) our libertarian freedom and genuine moral responsibility. There are, of course, limits to the extent and manner of this sort of control over the free behavior of another person, beyond which it becomes a negative kind of manipulation. It's plausible that parents sometimes rightly exercise some degree of this benevolent sort of control over the free behavior of their (young and adult) children. But even well-intentioned parents can carry this too far, so that it becomes inappropriate. However, in the case of God's exercising this sort of control over us, there is (i) a different relationship involved (creator to creature and not merely parent to child), which makes different kinds of control appropriate, and (ii) a *perfect* being who won't stray from appropriately respectful control into harmful manipulation.[51]

---

[51] Thanks to Tom Flint for conversations on the ideas in this paragraph. He doesn't endorse all that I've said here, but he too was concerned about the use of the word 'manipulation' and its

Fourth, and last, Open Theists (including Zimmerman) should agree with Molinists that God is as "manipulative" as it is possible for God to be. The difference between Open Theists and Molinists on this topic is over how "manipulative" (or, better, benignly controlling) it is *possible* for God to be. But Open Theists and Molinists should agree that, contrary to the emphasis on the "manipulation" terminology in both the Standard and Extreme Manipulation Objections, it is not *morally* problematic for God to exercise a *very high degree* of benign control over our free behavior. According to Open Theists, even though God lacks *full* providential control and foreknowledge of free creaturely action, God has the ability to exercise over us a super-charged version of the kind of control that parents have over the behavior of their children or that con-artists have over their marks. The control that these humans have over others comes from a knowledge of human behavior and of the idiosyncratic motives, susceptibilities, and histories of particular people; this control also depends on an ability to manipulate the environments of others. The God of Open Theism has all of these powers over us to a very high degree. And since it is not difficult for God to have this kind of power and knowledge (it's just there and available for God to use), it is arguably loving for God to use that power and knowledge for our good.[52] But then, on both Open Theism and Molinism, God's goodness and love would lead God to benignly control our free actions in whatever ways are possible (consistent with divine perfection) for our good. Once the Open Theist grants the moral acceptability of a perfectly good creator exercising a very high degree of benign control over free creaturely behavior, she loses her reason for thinking that God's *goodness* would prevent God from benignly controlling our free behavior in the Molinist way.

In short: Zimmerman's Extreme Manipulation Objection (like the Standard Manipulation Objection) is not ultimately compelling until something more persuasive can be said in support of the claim that divine Molinist-style control over what we do is incompatible with our creaturely freedom.[53]

---

negative connotations that are being inappropriately associated with the Molinist view of God's providential control.

[52] As noted in the previous paragraph: there are no concerns that God would do so nefariously or that God would *inappropriately* interfere with our autonomy, given that God is perfectly good, that God has over us the rights of a creator to his creatures, and that our behavior would remain libertarian-ly free and responsible.

[53] Thanks to Jeff Brower, Jean-Baptiste Guillon, Perry Hendricks, Hud Hudson, Trenton Merricks, Michael Rea, and Dean Zimmerman for comments on earlier drafts. Thanks also to Bill Hasker and Tom Flint for helpful conversations about some of the ideas in this paper.

Bibliography

Alston, William. 1985. "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God." *Faith and Philosophy* 2: 5–20. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19852114.

Bergmann, Michael. 1999. "Might-Counterfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness and Plantinga's Free Will Defense." *Faith and Philosophy* 16: 336–51. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil199916332.

Craig, William. 2011. "Yet Another Failed Anti-Molinist Argument" in *Molinism, The Contemporary Debate*, edited by Ken Perszyk, 144–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0011.

DeRose, Keith. 1991. "Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility, and the Problem of Evil." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21: 497–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1991.10717258.

DeRose, Keith. 1999. "Can It Be That It Would Have Been Even Though It Might Not Have Been?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 385–413. https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.33.s13.17.

Flint, Thomas. 2009. "Divine Providence" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, edited by Thomas Flint and Michael Rea, 262–85. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199289202.001.0001.

Flint, Thomas. 2015. "Molinism." *Oxford Handbooks Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935314.013.29.

Hasker, William. 1990. "Response to Thomas Flint." *Philosophical Studies* 60: 117–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00370981.

Hasker, William. 1992. "Providence and Evil: Three Theories." *Religious Studies* 28: 91–105. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500021405.

Hasker, William. 2011. "Trenton Merricks on Some Anti-Molinist Arguments" in *Molinism, The Contemporary Debate*, edited by Ken Perszyk, 73–77. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0005.

Howard-Snyder, Daniel and John Hawthorne. 1998. "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44: 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003210017171.

Lewis, David. 1973. *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lewis, David. 1986. "Postscript to 'Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow'" in David Lewis *Philosophical Papers, Volume II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195036468.003.0002.

Merricks, Trenton. 2007. *Truth and Ontology*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199205233.001.0001.

Merricks, Trenton. 2011. "Truth and Molinism" in *Molinism, The Contemporary Debate*, edited by Ken Perszyk, 50–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0004.

Perszyk, Ken. 2011. *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.001.0001.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Stalnaker, Robert. 1968. "A Theory of Conditionals" in *Studies in Logical Theory*, edited by Nicholas Rescher, 98–112. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Trakakis, Nick. 2006. "Does Hard Determinism Render the Problem of Evil even Harder?" *Ars Disputandi* 6:1 239–264.
https://doi.org/10.1080/15665399.2006.10819932.

Zimmerman, Dean. 2009. "Yet Another Anti-Molinist Argument" in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, edited by Samuel Newlands and Lary M. Jorgensen, 33–94. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199542680.003.0003.

Zimmerman, Dean. 2011a. "A *Précis* of 'Yet Another Anti-Molinist Argument'" in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, edited by Ken Perszyk, 140–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0010.

Zimmerman, Dean. 2011b. "An Anti-Molinist Replies" in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, edited by Ken Perszyk, 163–86. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0012.