

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation

Lecture 11

A Critical Assessment of Three Views of Divine Providence

Last time we discussed three competing accounts of divine providence: Calvinism (which posits a universal divine causal determinism coupled with a compatibilist view of human freedom), Arminianism (which postulates human freedom – libertarian freedom – coupled with simple foreknowledge of the future so that God foreordains or predestines what he knows via his foreknowledge will take place), and finally we looked at the Molinist view of providence (according to which God knows what any free person would freely do in any set of circumstances in which God might place him and thus by choosing to create certain persons in certain circumstances God can so providentially order the world that his purposes are ultimately achieved through the free decisions of creatures).

START DISCUSSION

Student: Regarding middle knowledge . . . the question is: is there more to it than just . . .? From what I understand, I think it's a theoretical knowledge, correct? But is there more to it than that?

Dr. Craig: What do you mean by “theoretical knowledge?”

Student: What I understand from what you have said in the past and even last week was that God can look at things from the perspective of what would happen in any given situation or something like that. So the way I understand that is – I'm kind of boiling that down to theoretical knowledge as opposed to maybe actual knowledge because not everything that can happen actually does happen. Is that a good way of looking at it?

Dr. Craig: I don't think the word “theoretical” captures it very well. What about the word “hypothetical?” It's knowledge of what would happen if such-and-such were the case. It's a hypothetical knowledge. But it is important to understand that this hypothetical knowledge is actual knowledge. The situations that are envisioned in the if-clause (“if such-and-such were the case”) may never happen; that's true. In that sense it's not actual. Indeed, these types of hypothetical if-then statements are often called counterfactuals because the antecedent clause is never actualized. But nevertheless it is knowledge of the actual world. These counterfactuals are actually true. It really is true that if Peter were in exactly these circumstances he would freely deny Christ three times. It is not true that he would boldly stand for Christ in those circumstances. He would deny him three times. So it is knowledge of the actual world. But it is hypothetical knowledge of how persons would behave under certain circumstances.

Student: If you don't mind, I just had a follow up on that. OK, so hypothetical knowledge then. I would agree with you that if God has all knowledge then he would have hypothetical knowledge.

Dr. Craig: Could I just comment on that? Your point is a good one. The Reformed theologians didn't deny that God has this sort of hypothetical knowledge. But they would say that he only has it logically posterior to his decree to create a world whereas Molina thought he had this knowledge logically prior to his decree to create a world. What the Calvinist says is that God determines which counterfactuals are true and which are false. It is God who determines that if Peter were in such-and-such circumstances he would freely deny Christ three times. That is the result of God's decree. Whereas on Molina's view, this knowledge and the truth of that statement is independent of God's decree. It is logically prior to God's decree. Molina thought that both the followers of Thomas Aquinas as well as the Protestant reformers like Calvin robbed people of significant freedom because they were determined what they would do in any circumstances God might place them in.

Student: Just one quick thing, and you might have already answered this with what you just said, but I just want to make sure that . . . if God . . . Here's what I'm trying to understand. If God has all knowledge – hypothetical knowledge, actual knowledge, whatever – my question is if he's got the actual knowledge then why would he need to use then the hypothetical knowledge in his, say, decision-making process?

Dr. Craig: Because he needs to decide which persons to create in which circumstances. Suppose that via his middle knowledge God knew that if Peter were in precisely those circumstances in the high priests' courtyard that he would freely stand for Christ and would not deny Christ three times. Then in that case, given that it's God's will that that happen, he wouldn't have created Peter in those circumstances. He would have either put him in some other circumstances or put a different disciple in the courtyard where he would deny three Christ times. Similarly with Judas. Suppose that it's God's will that Judas betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin thus condemning him to the cross. He can do that because he knows what Judas would freely do in those circumstances. And if Judas wouldn't freely do it then God would have to find some other way – he'd have to put somebody else in the circumstances or find some other circumstances in which Judas would betray Jesus. So this middle knowledge is absolutely vital to God's planning and providentially ordering a world of free creatures without robbing them of their freedom. Good questions, thank you.

Student: Last week I know you're on Calvinism, Armenianism, and Molinism. On Armenianism, if God knows what is going . . .

Dr. Craig: Can I just issue a corrective? This is not insignificant. It's Arminianism, not Armenianism. Armenian is a nationality – from Armenia, over in the Middle East around Azerbaijan. Arminianism (with an “i”) is from Jacob Arminius, the Protestant theologian. So on Arminianism . . . go ahead.

Student: OK, right, the latter – regarding God knowing what is going to happen. Last week I know you said *therefore he's ordained it*. How do you reconcile that with the evil that happens? I guess I'm asking for the definition of “ordained” in that regard.

Dr. Craig: It is easy to reconcile with the evil in the world – at least human evil – because God doesn't determine what those agents will do. He gives them free will and lets them decide how they want, but they simply can't escape God's foreknowledge of it. He knows the evil acts that they will do. God's knowledge is, as I said, like an infallible barometer of the weather. It predicts infallibly what will happen, but the readings of the barometer don't determine the weather. In the same way, God's foreknowledge doesn't determine people to do evil acts. I think your follow-up question there is a very good one – well, then what does foreordination or predestination really amount to on this view? It seems to be simply the declaration that these foreknown events will happen. God looks into the future, sees that these things will happen, and therefore he declares or decrees these things will happen.

Student: There's an example that Jesus used – a king that issues an invitation to the banquet. All the invited people turned down the invitation, so he sent out servants to go to the street to invite anybody, and the banquet still happens. Isn't this just the way that God operates? He always issues relational invitations, and yet people choose to accept or turn down. If they turn down, still the relationship has been built, just with someone else.

Dr. Craig: I think that would be the Molinist or Arminian view. Yes, people have the freedom to turn down God's gracious invitations, and if they do, God can invite others. It's interesting, though, in that parable what the king says to his servants is, *Go out into the highways and the byways and compel them to come in*, which sounds like coercion. Sadly in church history this verse has been used to justify religious persecution on the part of the institutional church where, for example, the Catholic authorities would compel people under pain of persecution or death to obey and believe in the Gospel. So the parable, I think you've rightly interpreted it, but it does have this expression in there “compel them” which is kind of interesting.

Student: I'm trying to understand the difference between the Calvinist and the Molinist view. The Calvinist I believe would say if something happens or you make a decision because God told you to make that decision, you're under his will and that's what he wanted you to do. Whereas the Molinist, I feel like you were just saying God knows all the different alternatives and so he's going to pick the hypothetical situation where he

knows you're going to make the decision that he wanted you to make in that moment. So what ultimately is the difference if ultimately you're just making the decision God wants you to do? What's the difference between him just making you do it and him choosing the hypothetical situation where he knew you would make the decision?

Dr. Craig: The difference – and I think you highlighted it accurately – is freedom. On the one view people are causally determined to do what they do. Whereas on the Molinist view, they have genuine libertarian freedom to do the act or not, but God simply knows which one they would choose. So they both have an extremely strong view of divine sovereignty. God is in control. But the one is compatible with libertarian freedom and the other one isn't.

Student: I guess I just didn't see the freedom. If God is choosing the situation where he knew you would make that decision, like the whole thing with Peter you were just given. To me there really isn't any freedom because God chose the hypothetical situation where he knew that you would act in that way in that moment. See the difference?

Dr. Craig: But when he puts you in that situation, even though he knows how you would freely act, he doesn't do anything to determine you to act in that way. It's hands off. God puts you in the situation and then he steps back and lets you make the choice. He just knows how you would choose. Molina would add as well that in every good moral choice you make, God wills that you choose the good, but in any evil moral choice you make, that is not God's perfect will. In every situation in which a person finds himself, it is always God's will – his absolute will – that that person choose the good and do the right thing. But God, as I say, permits them to choose evil acts even though that doesn't represent his absolute will. But it is his conditional will, so to speak, to permit them to do that because he knows that he will be able to ultimately achieve his purposes even through these evil choices. So although both views have a very strong affirmation of divine sovereignty, they are radically different with respect to human freedom.

Student: I'm curious how these three different views line up with different church traditions or denominations. So, for example, I think we all know that Calvinism is the official doctrine of Presbyterian denomination, but are there other denominations or groups that have as their official doctrine Arminianism or Molinism?

Dr. Craig: Methodists and other persons in the Wesleyan tradition will be Arminian, whereas Lutherans and Reformed Presbyterian denominations will be Calvinist or Augustinian in their doctrine. There isn't any Molinist denomination, interestingly enough. Molina was a Catholic counter-Reformer. He was a Jesuit. He was a member of the Jesuit Society. For a couple of centuries the Jesuit Society was dominated by Molinism but then it fell into disuse and was eclipsed for a few centuries until being revived in the 1970s by analytic philosophers of religion working in the United States

who had never even heard of Luis Molina. So Molinism isn't identified with any particular confessing tradition or denomination. It's Catholic, but it isn't the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. I should say that following Molina's exposition of his theory, there was a long, long inquiry in Rome as to whether or not this doctrine was orthodox or whether it was heretical. On several occasions it appeared that Molina was on the verge of condemnation and could have been dragged before the Inquisition, even burned at the stake. But at each time the council drew back, and finally the Pope declared that either Molinism or Thomism are equally valid options for Catholic theologians, and therefore the Jesuits were orthodox, good Catholics. So the view is tolerated within Catholicism, but, as I say, was allowed to atrophy for several centuries until now being recently revived.

Student: You know I gotta weigh in on this! I see these three views as an attempt to wedge God's omniscience into time and space. I offer the fourth view. These things exist in tension (free will, responsibility, and God's election) by a being that's not bound by time and space. As soon as we introduce time and space this is problematic because we're bound that way. God isn't. My favorite verse with this always is Romans 4:17 – *God calls all things as though they are.*

Dr. Craig: Let me say in response to your point, certainly there is always the option to say it is a mystery and we cannot provide a model that resolves divine sovereignty and human freedom and that this is hidden in the counsels of God. But while I think that that is a legitimate response – God is after all ultimately incomprehensible in the sense that we cannot completely comprehend him by human intelligence – I think that this would only be a last resort theologically. It would only be after diligent, hard thinking and inquiry into the subject that one should throw up one's hands and say it's insoluble, it's a mystery, and I don't think we're at that point. I think that we can provide a good model. I would say, too, that none of these models that we've talked about here depend upon thinking that God is in time. Calvin and other Reformed theologians would take God to be timeless, so would Thomas Aquinas. As for Molina, I think he could also affirm the timelessness of God. I'm not sure what his exact view was, but there's nothing about his view that requires that God be temporal. And the same for Arminianism. When the Arminian speaks of foreknowledge of the future, that might sound like God is in time, but that is talking about what God knows from our perspective. From our perspective it's foreknowledge, but, as you say, if God is outside of time then he doesn't literally foreknow the future; he just knows what is future for us. So Arminianism as well, which affirms foreknowledge, is also consistent with God's being timeless.

Student: I think I need just a little bit more clarification about God's perfect will versus his permissive will. You said it's God's will for Peter to deny Christ three times. His perfect will for Peter would not be for him to deny Christ, however he put him in a

situation because it was, I guess, his permissive will for him to deny Christ three times. Would you have to bring in God's intentions for that? Like, *It is my will for Peter to be put in a situation where he will deny Christ three times because later he'll look back on this and he'll be a stronger Christian for it?* Would you bring in his intentions and why this would be his permissive will vs. his perfect will?

Dr. Craig: I think that is exactly right. The distinction is between God's absolute will for Peter (which is always that he not do evil; that he not sin) and his conditional will for Peter which would be based upon, as you say, these intentions as to how this would work out in Peter in becoming the leader of the early church and being effective as the head of the church and all that Peter had to learn through this terrible incident of denying Christ. So those would be his conditional intentions for Peter where he might be led to permit Peter to do something that is not in a sense God's absolute will for Peter. These are great questions.

Student: I'd like to bring this into personal experience. If God creates me in a certain way because he knows I'm going to react to a certain situation a certain way, puts me in that situation, gives me a weapon, I use the weapon, and he knew obviously from creating me, how do I have free choice and how will I be judged?

Dr. Craig: You have free choice because you're not causally determined to use that weapon. You choose to use the weapon of your own free will. It's up to you – that is to say on the Arminian or Molinist view. On the Calvinist view, God moves your will to pull the trigger and use the weapon. In that case I think it is difficult to see how you do so freely because you're causally determined to do it. The most the Calvinist can affirm is, as I said, a sort of compatibilist view of freedom where freedom is compatible with being causally determined. You don't do it against your will when you pull the trigger, so in that sense it's voluntary. But nevertheless you are causally determined to do it. On Arminianism and Molinism that's just not the case. It is as causally indeterminate as a quantum physical event on the standard Heisenberg interpretation of quantum indeterminacy. It's just not causally determined. It's indeterminate.

Student: I think every good parent uses middle knowledge when they're raising very young children with sweets. My question deals with how far out does God choose to have middle knowledge? You were saying he had it before creation. I don't think . . . If you went out indefinitely maybe you really don't have libertarian free will. But to have sovereignty, like most Baptists believe, God is totally sovereign. He uses middle knowledge in the moment to guide a king's heart like water in his hand.

Dr. Craig: Let me respond to a couple of interesting things you've said. I think you are absolutely right that as parents or in ordinary rational decision-making we use this kind of hypothetical knowledge or counterfactual knowledge all the time. When I'm at a light

wanting to turn right on the red, I look at the oncoming traffic and I think, *If I were to pull out now I would make it*. That's this kind of hypothetical knowledge. Or, *If I want a raise from the boss, I think, no, I better not go ask because if I were to ask he would tear my head off*. So we use this kind of knowledge all the time in rational decision-making. Now, our ability to know these kind of counterfactuals is obviously very limited. As you say, it doesn't go very far out. But for an omniscient being whose knowledge is infinite, I would say that God's knowledge goes endlessly out all the way into the future without end. That's important because that means that God may permit certain things to happen in our lives whose reason will not emerge until three hundred years from now or a thousand years from now or maybe even in the afterlife. Therefore it is impossible (this is related to the problem of evil) for us to say God has no good reason for allowing this tragedy to enter our lives. We simply are too limited in our knowledge to know what might be God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting this event to occur because his middle knowledge just infinitely outstrips what we know of these kinds of counterfactual situations.

END DISCUSSION

Let's turn to an assessment of these three views.

First, the Calvinist view depends, as you recall, upon universal divine causal determinism of events in order to explain divine providence. And here I want to raise five points of critique.

First of all, I do not think that universal divine causal determinism can offer a coherent interpretation of Scripture. Interestingly enough, many of the classical Reformed theologians freely admit this. They acknowledge that the reconciliation of scriptural texts which affirm human freedom and contingency are irreconcilable with scriptural texts affirming divine sovereignty. They would say it's a mystery. It is inscrutable and simply beyond our ability to formulate.

You can reconcile universal divine causal determinism with human freedom by interpreting freedom in compatibilist terms. Compatibilism actually entails determinism. The problem is that I think adopting compatibilism achieves reconciliation with human freedom only at the expense of denying what the scriptural texts seem clearly to affirm, that is to say genuine indeterminacy and contingency of our free choices. So the first criticism is that universal divine causal determinism cannot really give us a coherent model of the scriptural teaching on divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Secondly, universal causal determinism cannot be rationally affirmed. There is a sort of dizzying self-defeating character to determinism. For if you come to believe that determinism is true then you have to believe that the reason you believe determinism is true is because you were determined to believe it. You have not, in fact, been able to

freely weigh the arguments pro and con and make up your mind on that basis. So the difference between a person who believes the arguments for determinism and the person who rejects the arguments for determinism is simply that the one has been determined to believe the arguments and the other one has been determined not to believe them. When you come to realize that your decision to believe in determinism was itself determined and that even your present realization of that fact is itself also causally determined then a sort of vertigo sets in because everything you think (even that very thought itself) is outside of your control. Determinism on this view could be true. This doesn't show determinism is false. Maybe everything is determined. But it's very hard to see how determinism could ever be rationally affirmed because its affirmation would undermine the rationality of that affirmation. So the second point is that universal causal determinism cannot be rationally affirmed.

The third point is that universal divine causal determinism makes God the author of sin and it undercuts human responsibility. Curiously some Reformed theologians seem to admit as much. For example, the Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck admits that if we construe divine conservation as God's recreation of the world at each successive moment (in other words, occasionalism) he says, "All created beings would then exist in appearance only and be devoid of all independence, freedom and responsibility. God himself would be the cause of sin."¹ But given determinism, there's no more independence, freedom, and responsibility than on recreation at every subsequent moment for on the deterministic view even the movement of the human will is caused by God. God moves people to choose evil and they cannot do otherwise. God determines their choices and makes them do what is wrong. If it's evil to make another person do something wrong then on this view God is not only the cause of sin and evil but he becomes evil himself, which is absurd. By the same token, all human responsibility for sin has been obliterated because our choices are not really up to us. God causes us to make them, and therefore we cannot really be responsible for our actions for nothing that we think or do is up to us. So the third criticism is that universal divine causal determinism makes God the author of sin and it undercuts human responsibility.

The fourth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism nullifies human agency. Since our choices are not up to us but are in fact caused by God, human beings cannot be said to be real agents. They are mere instruments by means of which God produces some effect, much like a man using a stick to move a stone. Of course, the secondary instrumental causes retain all of their properties and powers as intermediate causes just as a stick retains its powers and properties which make it suitable for the purpose of moving a stone with it. So the Calvinist thinkers do not need to be occasionalists like

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, God and Creation, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 607.

Malebranche or the medieval Muslim theologians. They can affirm that these intermediate secondary causes have real powers and properties. But notice that these intermediate causes are not agents themselves. They are mere instruments, mere instrumental causes, for they have no power to initiate action on their own. Hence, on determinism there really is at the end of the story only one agent in the world and that is God. The Reformed theologian of the 19th century, B. B. Warfield, affirms, “The reality and real efficiency of all second causes . . . as the proximate producers of the effect that takes place”² – so he affirms that these secondary or instrumental causes have real efficiency and reality, but he doesn't answer the objection that in a deterministic world these intermediate secondary causes are mere instruments and therefore does not answer the objection that in a deterministic world there is only one agent, namely God. But this conclusion goes not only against our knowledge of ourselves as agents but it also makes it inexplicable why God then would treat us as agents, holding us responsible for what he caused us to do and used us to do. So the fourth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism nullifies human agency.

Finally, the fifth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism makes reality into a farce. The whole world becomes a vain and empty spectacle. There are no free agents in rebellion against God, no free agents to whom God speaks to win them through his love, no one who freely responds to that love and freely gives his love and praise to God in return. The whole spectacle is just a charade whose only real actor is God himself. To illustrate, I remember seeing several years ago an arresting cartoon which depicted a marionette with strings attached to him standing behind a podium giving a speech. The marionette was saying, “Now concerning the Reformed doctrine of predestination.” And then when you look at the audience listening to the marionette, they were all marionettes with their strings attached! As you look at the picture the whole thing just looked like a farce. It was just nonsensical. So I'm convinced that far from glorifying God, Calvinism actually denigrates God for engaging in such a farcical charade. It's insulting to God to think that he would create beings who are in every respect causally determined by him and then treat them as though they were free agents, punishing them for the wrong actions that he made them do, or loving them as though they were freely responding agents. God on this view would be like a little child that sets up his toy soldiers and then moves them around in his play world pretending that they are real persons whose every motion is not, in fact, of his own doing and then pretending that they somehow merit praise or blame. So the fifth criticism is, again, that universal divine causal determinism makes reality into a farce.

² B. B. Warfield, “The Significance of the Confessional Doctrine of the Decree,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (1970-73; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 1:98-99.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I thought your second point about how determinism can't be rationally affirmed because everything we believe is determined . . . I'm just kind of thinking about that. In what sense do we choose freely our beliefs? I've heard it said by some people, *If I go outside, can I really choose to believe that, say, the sky is green or something?*

Dr. Craig: I agree that for many of our beliefs we're not free to believe or not believe. It would be impossible for me to bring myself to believe that I'm not here in this room talking to you, or at least that you appear to be here. But when I look at the phenomenology of many of the other sorts of beliefs that I hold, I don't feel that I am determined to believe them. It seems to me that I do have the ability to choose to believe or not to believe and to weigh the arguments and the evidence and then freely make up my mind where the evidence lies. So while I think it's true that some beliefs force themselves upon us, that's certainly I don't think the case for many beliefs especially concerning these sorts of recondite matters that are not forced upon us.

Student: I've been thinking about your argument with respect to the rational unaffirmability of determinism for a while. I'm wondering if you should attenuate the argument a bit so that it only applies to internalists. According to Proper Functionalism, for example, my belief is warranted and is rational insofar as these external factors of proper function are in place but I needn't have epistemic access to what justifies those beliefs in order to know that. So don't you think this argument only applies if one is an internalist about knowledge?

Dr. Craig: All right, this is a very technical question which I haven't given due consideration to. You might well be correct. I'd have to think about that some more. I must say that for me, if I were to adopt this sort of functionalist view that would make these beliefs warranted and rational, it would still leave me extremely uncomfortable to think that I'm just determined to believe that and that the difference between me and you is simply that you were determined to believe one way and I was determined to believe the other way. But maybe you're right; maybe it does depend upon some sort of internalist access to these mental states. Good question.

Student: If determination is the truth the way you've described it, would it not nullify the need for Christ to have been sent to the Earth to be crucified for us to reach salvation?

Dr. Craig: What would make you say that? Let me respond and see how you would respond to this. The Reformed thinker would say that we find ourselves under God's just condemnation for our sin, and therefore if we are to be justified and redeemed then there needs to be a satisfaction of divine justice. Christ's death on the cross was therefore necessary to satisfy the demands of divine justice so that I might be saved even if my being saved is unilaterally determined by God. He would choose whom he wants to be

saved and whom he would overlook. But nevertheless in order to be saved there needs to be an expiation of my sin. How would you respond to that?

Student: I think what we're saying then, if I understand it correctly, that when God created man (Adam and Eve) he, in fact, did have free will. He chose evil, therefore it was necessary for Christ to have died, but in that point in time it was that because sin had entered into the world, and therefore he's not the author of sin. But he determined from that point forward, or made the decision from that point forward, who would be saved and who wouldn't. Is that the way you understand it to be?

Dr. Craig: No, it's not. But even on that scenario, your original question was why would Christ need to die . . .

Student: I understand that now; yeah, it would be.

Dr. Craig: . . . of God's justice for our sin. But the question of whether or not Adam and Eve freely sinned is really interesting for the Calvinist because they were not sinful when they made that decision, right? They were innocent when they chose to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When I was in seminary as a student, Jan and I would pick up the Reformed theologian John Gerstner at the airport at O'Hare and drive him to the seminary to teach his classes. He was a visiting professor. And one of my professors teased me by saying, *Ask Gerstner (who is a Calvinist) why Adam and Eve sinned and fell.* Because on his view it's really difficult unless you say God determined Adam and Eve to fall. So there wasn't human freedom; he made them fall. Otherwise the Calvinist gives up his doctrine of divine sovereignty and providence.

Student: But that could be an explanation of why free will is mentioned – that when God created man in his image, he created him with free will, and man as in Adam chose with that free will to act to bring evil.

Dr. Craig: I think what is happening here now is our discussion is beginning to bleed over into the doctrine of salvation. Whereas the doctrine of providence is much broader than that. We are talking here about why I choose green jello rather than red jello when I go through the cafeteria line. The Calvinist would say God determines you to choose the red jello, whereas the Arminian and Molinist would say, no, he leaves that free choice up to you. Now, whether or not the decision to believe in Christ for salvation is free and indeterminate, that's another question. That's going to depend, as you say, on the doctrine of sin and the degree to which we are slaves to sin, and God's prevenient grace in our lives. While that is related, at least for now this doctrine of providence is much, much broader than the decision to believe in Christ for salvation.

Student: So the Calvinist believes everything, whether you pick green jello or red, is determined, not just who is going to be saved.

Dr. Craig: Right, that's the force of the word "universal." When I say "universal divine causal determinism" it is that every detail is sovereignly decreed by God to happen. So there is no libertarian freedom on this view. This is because of the desire to have a very, very strong doctrine of divine sovereignty.

Student: That's predestination?

Dr. Craig: It's more than just predestination. Predestination usually has to do with salvation. This is a strong doctrine of providence.

END DISCUSSION³