

Robert Adams's New Anti-Molinist Argument

William Lane Craig

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SUMMARY

Robert Adams has presented a new argument to show the logical impossibility of divine middle knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. However, Adams's reasoning is unsound because the notion of "explanatory priority" as it plays a role in the argument is either equivocal or not demonstrably transitive. Moreover, his argument contains a false (fatalistic) premiss.

See also my related article "Adams on Actualism and Presentism".

ROBERT ADAMS'S NEW ANTI-MOLINIST ARGUMENT

Although Thomas Flint considers the major objections to the Molinist doctrine of middle knowledge to have been answered, so that the job of applying this doctrine theologically can get underway, [1] Robert Adams, undeterred, has presented a new anti-Molinist argument aimed at showing the logical impossibility of middle knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. [2] Inspired by William Hasker's argument that middle knowledge of such counterfactuals is incompatible with creaturely freedom, [3] Adams's new argument is directed toward the same conclusion, but avoids any appeal to Hasker's dubious--and, I should say, clearly false--premise that on the Molinist view counterfactuals of freedom are more fundamental features of the world than categorical facts. [4]

After summarizing the intuitive basis of his argument, [5] Adams develops the following more rigorous formulation:

1. According to Molinism, the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to God's decision to create us.
2. God's decision to create us is explanatorily prior to our existence.
3. Our existence is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
4. The relation of explanatory priority is transitive.
5. Therefore, it follows from Molinism (by 1-4) that the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.

10. It follows also from Molinism that if I freely do action A in circumstances C, then there is a true counterfactual of freedom F*, which says that if I were in C, then I would (freely) do A.

11. Therefore, it follows from Molinism that if I freely do A in C, the truth of F* is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

12. If I freely do A in C, no truth that is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

13. The truth of F* (which says that if I were in C, then I would do A) is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C.

14. If Molinism is true, then if I freely do A in C, F* both is (by 11) and is not (by 12-13) explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

15. Therefore, (by 14) if Molinism is true, then I do not freely do A in C.

In his critique of Adams's earlier anti-Molinist argument, Plantinga charged that the argument is unsound because the dependency relation involved is not a transitive relation. [6] It seems to me that the present argument shares a similar failing. The notion of "explanatory priority" as it plays a role in the argument seems to me equivocal, and if a univocal sense can be given it, there is no reason to expect it to be transitive.

Consider the explanatory priority in (2) and (3). Here a straightforward interpretation of this notion can be given in terms of the counterfactual dependence of consequent on condition:

2.' If God had not created us, we should not exist.

3.' If we were not to exist, we should not make any of our choices and actions.

Both (2') and (3') are metaphysically necessary truths. But this sense of explanatory priority is inapplicable to (1), for

1.' According to Molinism, if all true counterfactuals of freedom about us were not true, God would not have decided to create us

is false. Molinism makes no such assertion, since God might still have created us even if the actually true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom were false or even, *per impossibile*, if no such counterfactuals at all were true. The sense of explanatory priority in (1) must therefore be different than it is in (2) and (3).

The root of the difficulty seems to be a conflation of reasons and causes on Adams's part. The priority in (2) and (3) is a sort of causal or ontic priority, but the priority in (1) is not causal or ontic, since the truth of all counterfactuals of creaturely freedom is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of God's decision to create us. At best, the truth of such counterfactuals is prior to His decision in providing a partial reason for that decision. By contrast the truth of counterfactuals of divine freedom and of contingent, categorical propositions does not furnish reasons for the divine creative decree and so is not prior to that decree. Adams's mistake seems to be that he leaps from God's decision in the hierarchy of reasons to God's decision in the hierarchy of causes and by this equivocation tries to make counterfactuals of creaturely freedom explanatorily prior to our free choices.

The invalidity of this move is evident from the fact that none of the senses of "explanatory priority" discussed have application to the peculiar priority inferred in (5). For example, suppose my wife and I are considering starting a family and that we come to believe, perhaps on the basis of a Scripture like Proverbs 22.6, that

A.* If children were born to us, they would come to love God.

Since this is important to us, we decide to start a family. Accordingly,

1.* The truth of (A*) is explanatorily prior to our decision to have children.

It is also undeniably true that

2.* Our decision to have children is explanatorily prior to the existence of our children.

3.* Our children's existence is explanatorily prior to their coming to love God.

So if (4) is true, we must conclude that

5.* The truth of (A*) is explanatorily prior to our children's coming to love God.

But I do not even understand the sense of explanatory priority in (5*).

Perhaps Adams can enunciate a univocal sense of "explanatory priority" that is applicable to (1-3). But I suspect that any such notion would be so generic and so weak that in order to avoid conclusions like (5*) we should have to deny its transitivity. Since (5) is an invalid inference, so is (11), and the *reductio* fails.

But more than that; the *reductio* also fails because (12) is false. Adams's intuition seems to be that if F* were explanatorily prior to my doing A in C, then I could not refrain from A, which is a

necessary condition of my doing A freely. But such an assumption seems doubly wrong. First, it represents the fallacious reasoning of fatalism. Though F* is (*ex concessiois*) in fact explanatorily prior to my freely doing A in C, it is within my power to refrain from doing A in C; only if I were to do so, F* would not then be explanatorily prior to my action nor a part of God's middle knowledge. Until Adams can show that the content of God's middle knowledge is a "hard fact," his argument based on (12) is undercut. Second, my being able to refrain from doing A in C is not a necessary condition of my freely doing A in C. For perhaps I do A in C without any causal constraint, but it is also the case that God would not permit me to refrain from A in C. Flint's essay on papal infallibility, which appears in the same volume as Adams's, provides a good illustration: though God would not permit the Pope to promulgate false doctrine, nevertheless he freely promulgates correct doctrine. [7] If such a scenario is coherent--and Flint seems to have refuted all objections to it--, then (12) is false.

Thus, it seems to me that both sides of Adams's *reductio* argument are unsound. His attempt to show that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are explanatorily prior to our actions fails due to equivocation. And even if they were in some peculiar sense explanatorily prior to our actions because they are true and known by God logically prior to categorical contingent propositions, that would not be incompatible with the freedom of our actions.

Footnotes

[1]

Thomas P. Flint, "Middle Knowledge and the Doctrine of Infallibility," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5: *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeway Publishing, 1991), p. 374.

[2]

Robert Merrihew Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 343-353. Although Adams briefly reiterates his previous anti-Molinist arguments based on counterfactuals of freedom lacking a ground, he declines to answer refutations of his earlier objections (e.g., Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Robert M. Adams," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, Profiles 5 [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985], pp. 371-382; Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction" to *On Divine Foreknowledge*, by Luis de Molina, trans. with Notes by A. J. Freddoso [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988], pp. 68-75; William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 19 [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990], pp. 247-269). Therefore,

I shall not comment on his remarks.

[3]

William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 29-52.

[4]

For a critique of Hasker's views, see William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 89-110.

[5]

Adams's intuitive summary is misleadingly ambiguous and, oddly, bears little resemblance to either Hasker's argument or Adams's own detailed formulation of the argument; but space does not permit an interpretive discussion here.

[6]

Plantinga, "Reply to Robert Adams," p. 376.

[7]

Flint, "Infallibility," pp. 385-390.