

THE POPULATION OF HELL: A MOLINIST APPROACH

Introduction

Whatever its precise nature, and however it is to be properly understood, hell (as the Bible presents it) is a frightening reality that no sane person should want to experience.¹ John refers to it as “the lake of fire” and “the second death” (Rev 20:14-15 NIV). Jesus describes it as a place of “darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:12). Perhaps most terrifying of all, however, is Paul’s statement that those in hell “will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:9).

If we ask who it is that will suffer this terrible fate, Paul tells us that it is “those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:8). This gospel, or “good news,” is that Christ has died “for our sins” and been “raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25; see also 1 Cor 15:1-4). By placing our faith in Him, we can be reconciled to God, receive forgiveness for our sins, and be made a “new creation” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17-21). This, at least in part, is the great hope of the gospel. But is this hope for everyone—or is it only intended for some? Is it genuinely possible for all men to be saved (even if all will not be)? Does God truly desire the salvation of all men? Could all men avoid hell (even if all will not)?

These are questions to which godly, intelligent, and theologically capable believers have given different answers. In this paper we will examine two approaches to these issues, focusing particularly on what each view has to say about the population of hell (i.e. who ends up in hell, and why). These views might generally be characterized as a Reformed perspective,

¹ For various (and generally conservative) views on the nature and theology of hell, one could consult the following works: William V. Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

represented by the theologian Robert Peterson, and a Molinist perspective, represented (in this paper) by a variety of scholars, but ultimately tracing its roots back to the writings of the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit theologian, Luis de Molina (1535-1600). We'll see that how each view understands the nature of divine sovereignty and human freedom is absolutely critical for how they answer the questions of who will be in hell, and why. I will argue (contra Peterson) that a Molinist approach offers the most satisfying way of answering these questions. We will begin our study with a brief examination of Robert Peterson's view.

Robert Peterson's View on the Population of Hell

Peterson argues that hell is populated by those who (1) have misused their freedom by committing actual sins (because they have inherited a sinful nature due to Adam's original sin), and (2) are the objects of God's sovereign will in reprobation.² He claims that the "ultimate reason" why some people perish must be traced to "the sovereign will of God in reprobation."³ At the same time, he recognizes that the reason typically offered in Scripture for this tragedy is "misused human freedom."⁴ He cites Revelation 20:11-15 as an important passage "because it presents the fates of human beings in terms of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility."⁵

The passage describes the judgment of the dead before the great white throne of God. In verses 12-13, we read that the dead are judged "according to what they had done." This speaks to the issue of how the dead used (or misused) their freedom during their earthly lives. However, in verse 15 the emphasis of the passage clearly falls on divine sovereignty. There we learn that "if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

² Robert A. Peterson, "Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell," in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 161-65.

³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

Since earlier, in Revelation 17:8, the author speaks of those “whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world,” the passage in chapter 20 seems not only to speak of individual human responsibility for one’s deeds, but also of God’s eternal decree in election and reprobation. As Peterson observes:

When John speaks of the books that recorded people’s deeds and of the book of life, he speaks of human freedom and divine sovereignty, respectively. Thus, both human freedom and divine sovereignty are true. Sinners get what they deserve from the hand of a holy God at the Last Judgment. At the same time God stands behind the fate of every person, the unsaved included.⁶

It seems to me that Peterson is *essentially correct* in his assessment of this passage. Like Peterson, I believe that Revelation 20:11-15 speaks of both human freedom and responsibility (on the one hand) and divine sovereignty (on the other). Moreover, I would also affirm (with Peterson) that God’s decree of election and reprobation occurs logically (if not temporally) prior to the creation of the universe. Where I would disagree with Peterson, then, is not so much in his *conclusions* about divine sovereignty and human freedom, but in the way he understands the *concepts* themselves. In other words, it seems to me that where Peterson goes wrong is in his understanding of the *nature* of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Hence, I will argue that a Molinist perspective on these important issues can get us to Peterson’s conclusions, but do so with fewer difficulties. In order to see this, we must first get a handle on Peterson’s understanding of the nature of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Peterson on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

Peterson does not discuss the nature of human freedom or its relationship to divine sovereignty in his essay on hell. In another context, however, he and co-author Michael Williams write, “We believe that Scripture assumes *compatibilism*, the view that divine sovereignty and responsible human freedom are not contradictory at all.”⁷ Unfortunately, this description of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 137.

compatibilism is not very precise.⁸ I believe that divine sovereignty and responsible human freedom are not contradictory and yet I am not a compatibilist, but a libertarian. What, then, serves to distinguish a compatibilist from a libertarian?

James Beilby and Paul Eddy define *compatibilism* as “the idea that freedom is compatible with necessity, e.g. person *P* is still ‘free’ with respect to choice *C* even though *C* is necessary. This term is most often used to express the idea that freedom is compatible with the kind of necessity entailed by causal determinism.”⁹ If we adopt this definition of compatibilism then we can clearly distinguish it from libertarianism. Compatibilism holds that an action can be free, even though that action is necessary and causally determined. Libertarianism, on the other hand, denies that such an action (i.e. one that is necessary and causally determined) can be truly free.¹⁰

Within a Christian worldview framework, compatibilism typically holds that a human action is free when the person acts in accordance with his desires, even though that action has been determined by God and the agent could not have done otherwise. This is essentially what Peterson and Williams affirm near the end of their discussion on human freedom: “Freedom in the compatibilist sense is the contention that even if every choice we make and every act we perform is determined by forces outside ourselves, and ultimately by God’s ordaining guidance, we are still free, for we still act according to our desires.”¹¹

⁸ Keathley observes that this is a relatively common problem among theologians. “Many in the theological world use the [compatibilist] label ambiguously to affirm the compatibility of free will and divine sovereignty—a position even open theists affirm. Rather, compatibilism affirms that free will is compatible with causal determinism.” See Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 65.

⁹ James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 208.

¹⁰ I will say more about libertarian freedom, and precisely what I mean by this terminology, later in the paper.

¹¹ Peterson and Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian*, 156.

Putting all this together, then, Peterson appears to understand God's sovereignty in terms of absolute (or complete) divine determinism.¹² God determines everything that happens, even the free actions of human beings. Although we cannot do other than what God has determined, we are still "free" so long as we are acting in accordance with our desires. Peterson offers the biblical example of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus.¹³ In Acts 2:23 Peter declares the following to the men of Israel: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Moreover, in Acts 4:27-28, we read: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Peterson correctly observes how closely these passages bring together God's sovereignty and human freedom. On the one hand, the crucifixion of Jesus takes place in accordance with "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). On the other hand, the act is carried out by "wicked men," such as Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Romans and the Jews (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). Even so, however, these men only did what God's "power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). Peterson concludes his discussion of these verses with the following remarks:

At one and the same time Jesus' crucifixion filled God's plan and was the greatest crime ever perpetrated! The tension between God's sovereignty and human freedom displayed in the Cross is indeed mysterious. . . . Inscrutably the Cross is both God's will, without

¹² J. A. Crabtree, in describing himself as a "divine determinist," says that by this phraseology he means to denote his belief that "every aspect of everything that occurs in the whole of reality is ultimately caused and determined by God." Expanding on this description later in his essay he writes, "The divine determinist, by the very nature of his position, must say that at any given time no one can ever choose or act contrary to what God has willed. Clearly, then, the divine determinist does not believe that a human is free to do differently from what he did; he is constrained by the governing will of God. If the divine determinist espouses human freedom, it must be freedom in a qualified and limited sense." See J. A. Crabtree, "Does Middle Knowledge Solve the Problem of Divine Sovereignty?," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 429n2, 49. Although Peterson is never quite as clear or explicit as Crabtree, their positions are essentially identical.

¹³ Peterson, "Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell," 159-60.

tarnishing him with evil, and the culpable deed of evildoers, without making them puppets whose strings are pulled by God.¹⁴

It cannot be denied that, on the surface at least, these passages appear to offer powerful support for Peterson's position regarding the relationship of divine sovereignty to human freedom. However, to this point, we have still not considered a Molinist approach to these issues. It is to this approach, therefore, that we must now direct our attention.

A Molinist View on the Population of Hell

Like Peterson, a Molinist will argue that hell is populated by those who (1) have misused their freedom by committing actual sins (having inherited a sinful nature due to Adam's original sin), and (2) are the objects of God's sovereign will in reprobation. Also like Peterson, the Molinist will agree that God's sovereign will in reprobation is the *primary reason* that an individual ends up in hell, whereas that individual's misused freedom is a crucially important, though nonetheless, *secondary reason*. Where the Molinist will disagree with Peterson, however, is with their understanding of the *concepts* of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Although some might be tempted to think that this is a distinction without a difference, since the views essentially end up in the same place, I think we'll actually see that where these views diverge becomes crucially important for how they understand the nature and character of God, including his salvific will for the world. In order to properly appreciate the Molinist perspective, however, we must begin with a bit of background information.

A Molinist Account of God's Knowledge

The strength of a Molinist approach lies in its ability to reconcile a very strong conception of divine sovereignty, meticulous providence and exhaustive foreknowledge, with a libertarian conception of human freedom. It does this by positing that God possesses a very unique kind of knowledge, which Molina described as "middle knowledge."¹⁵ According to

¹⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁵ Some helpful discussions concerning the doctrine of divine middle knowledge can be found in the following sources: William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom. The Coherence of Theism:*

Molina, “Unless we want to wander about precariously in reconciling our freedom of choice and the contingency of things with divine foreknowledge, it is necessary for us to distinguish *three* types of knowledge in God.”¹⁶ He refers to these three types of knowledge as *natural* knowledge, *middle* knowledge, and *free* knowledge. It’s important to recognize that these three types of knowledge are related to one another *logically*—not temporally.¹⁷ As an omniscient being, God never comes to learn something that he hasn’t always known. Bearing this in mind, let’s now briefly look at how these three types of knowledge are related to one another.

God’s *natural knowledge* gives him pre-volitional knowledge of all the possible worlds he *could* create.¹⁸ This type of knowledge tells God what *could* be. His *free knowledge* gives him post-volitional knowledge concerning all there is to know about the actual world, including everything that will happen throughout its history. This type of knowledge tells God what *will* be.

God’s *middle knowledge* received its name because it is logically ordered *between* (or in the *middle* of) God’s natural knowledge and free knowledge.¹⁹ Like God’s natural knowledge, middle knowledge is pre-volitional. But like his free knowledge, it gives God knowledge of that

Omniscience, vol. 19, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, ed. A. J. Vanderjagt (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991); William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. William P. Alston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Alfred J. Freddoso, “Introduction,” in *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*; Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology* (New York: University Press of America, 2007); Luis De Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 52.9. Molina briefly discusses each of the three types of divine knowledge in this section.

¹⁷ Craig compares this logical structure to the relationship of an argument’s premises to its conclusion. He writes, “The premises in an argument are logically prior to the conclusion, since the conclusion is derived from and based on the premises, even though temporally the premises and conclusion are all simultaneously true.” Similarly, we might say that God’s middle knowledge is logically prior to His free knowledge, since His free knowledge is based upon the combination of His middle knowledge and divine creative decree. This is so, however, even though God’s middle knowledge is not *temporally prior* to His free knowledge. The relationship is one of *logical*, not temporal, priority. See Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 128.

¹⁸ Pre-volitional knowledge refers to knowledge which God has logically *prior* to his creative decree. Post-volitional knowledge occurs logically *posterior* to this decree.

¹⁹ Freddoso, “Introduction,” 47.

which is contingent and could have been otherwise. According to Molina, God’s middle knowledge tells him what any free creature *would* do in any set of circumstances in which He might sovereignly choose to place it. This type of knowledge, then, tells God what *would* be—provided He decides to actualize it.²⁰ Molina describes this knowledge in the following words:

. . . the third type is *middle* knowledge, by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice, He saw in His own essence what each such faculty would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or in that or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.²¹

Having briefly surveyed the three types of divine knowledge distinguished by Molina, we are now in a position to understand the way in which the doctrine of middle knowledge can reconcile a very strong conception of divine sovereignty with libertarian human freedom.

A Molinist Account of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

In the Molinist account, God’s sovereignty is seen in the fact that He is the one who freely decides what world He wants to actualize. “Each ‘world’ represents a total description of reality, and each of these descriptions differs from one another. When God creates, he makes one possible world ‘actual’.”²² Of course, God could have chosen not to actualize a world at all. But

²⁰ Both Craig and Keathley point out that by means of God’s natural knowledge, He knows what *could* be. By means of His middle knowledge, He knows what *would* be (provided that He decides to actualize the relevant creatures and circumstances). And by means of His free knowledge (or foreknowledge), God knows what *will* be. God’s foreknowledge in this system is based upon His middle knowledge and His divine creative decree (concerning which creatures and circumstances to actualize). See William Lane Craig, “The Middle-Knowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 121; Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 17.

²¹ Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 52:9.

²² Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 211. To be even more precise (at least, within a Molinist system), he makes one *feasible* world actual. Feasible worlds constitute the infinite subset of all logically possible worlds that take into account the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (i.e. those true propositions describing what a creature would freely do in a specified set of circumstances). For example, there are logically possible worlds in which, instead of deciding to pursue doctoral studies at Dallas Seminary, I decide to become a truck driver, or a dentist, or a drug dealer. And this decision could be made in precisely those circumstances in which (in the actual world) I opted for further theological training. However, since God knew, via his middle knowledge, that I would freely opt for doctoral studies in the relevant circumstances, then provided that God wants to create me, place me in those circumstances, and leave me free in a libertarian sense, all the “possible” worlds in which I do those other things are no longer feasible for God to actualize—for they describe choices that I

if he does choose to bring a world into being, then the choice is his alone. It is up to God, therefore, what creatures (if any) he wants to actualize, what circumstances he wants to place them in, and so forth. Indeed, even the decision to endow some of his creatures with libertarian freedom is entirely up to God. It is his sovereign choice to create such creatures—and he was free to do otherwise had he so desired. Of course, if God does decide to create creatures with libertarian freedom, and if he decides to let them choose as they see fit, then God cannot *determine* their choices. For if he was to do this, then the creatures would no longer have libertarian freedom. Hence, it is up to God whether or not creatures with libertarian freedom will exist. But it is up to the creatures to decide what they will do with their God-given freedom.

Since middle knowledge tells God what any free creature will do in any set of circumstances in which he might sovereignly choose to place it, it (i.e. middle knowledge) offers a powerful way of reconciling a strong view of divine sovereignty with libertarian human freedom. For by having pre-volitional knowledge of what any possible creature would freely do, in any set of circumstances in which God might choose to place it, God can, by placing just the creatures he wants, in just the circumstances he chooses, providentially plan and order the world down to the most minute detail without violating human freedom along the way.²³

In order to see this more clearly, let's now consider how a Molinist might handle the same passages in Acts previously cited by Peterson in support of his view. In Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28 we are confronted with statements which assert a very strong conception of divine sovereignty, even as they appear to countenance genuine human freedom and responsibility. Both Peterson and the Molinist agree that these passages are teaching *both* divine sovereignty *and* human freedom. In Peterson's view, one reconciles God's sovereignty with human freedom by adopting a compatibilist view of human freedom. But Molinists find such a move unconvincing. To say that a person is free, even though everything that person does has been

would not freely make. The philosopher Thomas Flint was the first to make the terminological distinction between *possible* and *feasible* worlds. See Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 51-54.

²³ Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," 122.

determined by God in such a way that the person cannot do otherwise, seems actually to be a denial of human freedom. After all, compatibilism teaches that it is *God* who determines what any person will do in any set of circumstances. And if the person cannot do other than what God has determined, it is hard to see how his actions can really be free—not to mention how he can be *fairly* held responsible for those actions.²⁴

The Molinist, on the other hand, has a very robust doctrine of human freedom. According to this perspective, Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Romans and the Jews could have all acted differently than they did when they decided to crucify Jesus. They were genuinely free to do other than what they did (and hence are morally responsible for their actions). Granted, God knew, via His middle knowledge, that if he *were* to place Herod and Pilate, along with the individual Jews and Romans who participated in this event, in just these circumstances, they would *freely decide* to crucify Jesus, just as God willed. Moreover, were God to have known that the relevant agents would *not* crucify Jesus in these circumstances, then He could have either placed *different* agents in those circumstances (i.e. agents who would have freely voted for Jesus' crucifixion), or he could have somehow *altered the circumstances* so that the relevant agents would freely execute the Messiah. A Molinist perspective thus offers a very powerful way of accounting for the dual emphasis on both divine sovereignty and human freedom in texts of this sort.

Indeed, it seems to me that a Molinist approach offers a superior way of accounting for the biblical affirmations of divine sovereignty and human freedom than that offered by Peterson. This is because the Molinist holds to a libertarian conception of human freedom and believes that our choices are our own (at least, when we are acting with libertarian freedom). In order to see the benefits of adopting a libertarian perspective, we need to briefly examine what is meant by libertarian freedom within the context of this paper, what arguments there are in support of it, and why this is preferable to a compatibilist perspective.

²⁴ Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 28.

Libertarian Freedom

The Molinist holds to a libertarian conception of human freedom. However, it's important to observe that just as there are varieties of determinism, so also there are varieties of libertarianism. According to Keathley, libertarianism holds that "choices originate within persons."²⁵ This is sometimes referred to as "agent causation," meaning that the human agent is the cause of his actions, and the actions are not causally determined by forces outside of the agent.²⁶ Granted, there are a myriad of factors which can influence an agent's choices, but the libertarian insists that these influences do not causally determine the agent's action. At least, this is so when the agent is acting with libertarian freedom. And this brings up an important point about the varieties of libertarianism.

Broadly speaking, philosophers have distinguished two major types of libertarianism: hard libertarianism and soft libertarianism. Hard libertarianism insists that human agents "always have free will."²⁷ Soft libertarianism, on the other hand, holds only that agents *sometimes* act with free will. Since libertarians conceive of free will as the ability to do otherwise in a specified set of circumstances, soft libertarians can readily grant that human beings may not always have this ability. Nevertheless, soft libertarians will hold that at least sometimes, and on some occasions, human beings possess the ability to do other than what they actually do.

According to Keathley, there are "two distinctive features" which serve to distinguish soft libertarianism from soft determinism (i.e. compatibilism). First, a person's "*character determines the range of choices, rather than a specific choice itself.*"²⁸ Soft libertarians acknowledge the importance of an agent's character in the choices that agent makes. Nevertheless, they insist that an agent's character does not causally determine him to make one

²⁵ Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 64.

²⁶ Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 32.

²⁷ Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70. The emphasis here is Keathley's.

particular choice. An agent does have options when acting with libertarian freedom, but the range of options will be limited by the individual's character.

“The second distinctive feature of soft libertarianism is the contention that *the relationship between free choices and character is a two-way street.*”²⁹ Here Keathley explains that not only does our character determine the range of choices available to us at any given time, but our choices also shape our character. Whenever we make a free choice, our characters are being shaped. And as our character is shaped by our choices, this determines the range of options available to us in the future. As Keathley observes, “A person's character indeed limits his choices, but the present condition of one's character is the way it is because of the previous free decisions made during certain important ‘will-setting’ moments.”³⁰ Of all the options available concerning the nature of human freedom, it seems to me that some version of *soft libertarianism* is the one most likely to be true. But why think that libertarianism *is* true? What arguments can be offered on its behalf? And what advantages does it have over various deterministic theories, particularly compatibilism?

To begin, it's important to note that most Christian philosophers and theologians have traditionally held that God is a libertarianly free being. It is often pointed out, for example, that creation is a free act of God, an act from which he could have refrained. Not only so, but God could have created a very different world from the one he did create—a world with no people, say, or a world populated by different people than exist in the actual world. If these philosophers and theologians are correct, then clearly the concept of libertarian freedom cannot be intrinsically incoherent. What's more, since God created man in his image and likeness, it would be reasonable to believe that man, too, possesses a measure of libertarian freedom.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 72. Again, the emphasis is Keathley's.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The philosopher Thomas Flint makes the same point quite powerfully in the following words: “God is a free agent par excellence. But can God's freedom be plausibly understood in a compatibilist way? Is God causally determined to create as he does by causes over which he has no control? Of course not. There *are* no causes external to God which could, so to speak, set him in motion, for God is the free creator of all causal agents. Nor is it

Second, most people would admit to having a very strong metaphysical intuition that, at least on some occasions and in some circumstances, they really could have done something other than what they actually did do. Hence, in the absence of powerful arguments against this intuition, it would seem that we are justified in regarding it as veridical. But this entails that, at least on some occasions, our actions are free in a libertarian sense.

Third, if one takes Peterson's view, that "every choice we make and every act we perform is determined by forces outside ourselves, and ultimately by God's ordaining guidance,"³² then it becomes very difficult to see how God is not the author of sin and moral evil. For if everything we do is determined by God in such a way that we cannot do otherwise, then sin and moral evil must inevitably be traced back to God himself. And most Christians are unwilling to make such a move.³³ The libertarian hypothesis is able to avoid this conclusion by insisting that human beings are morally responsible agents who brought sin and evil into the world through a freely chosen, self-originating act of disobedience.³⁴

plausible to think that internal factors (relating to his nature or character, say) over which he has no control fully determine his creative activity. For if they did, this world would be the only genuinely possible world, and all true distinctions between necessity and contingency would collapse, as would the gratuitousness both of God's creation and of our existence. But if God is not determined to create as he does, should we conclude that God's creative actions are random, haphazard, irrational occurrences? By no means. God is the epitome of rationality for the Christian. . . . But then, if God's actions can be rational and appropriate, actions for which he is properly seen as morally praiseworthy, even in the absence of any ultimate causes beyond his control, then there clearly can be no *conceptual* problem with the notion of free, rational, responsible, but undetermined actions. And if there is no such conceptual problem, then there seems to be no conceptual problem with viewing ourselves as agents with libertarian freedom as well." See Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 30.

³² Peterson and Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian*, 156.

³³ Most, but not all. R.C. Sproul, Jr. *may* constitute an exception, depending on what he actually intends to say in his discussion of the origin of sin (e.g. suggesting that God "created sin," etc). See R. C. Sproul Jr., *Almighty over All: Understanding the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 54-59. On the other hand, John Gerstner, in discussing Augustine's views on this issue, describes the subject as something which "defies explanation." "Indeed," he says, "explanation always hovers near the abyss of blasphemously charging God with authoring sin." See John H. Gerstner, "Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards on the Bondage of the Will," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 281.

³⁴ Of course, the libertarian would agree that had God not created anything there would be no sin and evil. The point here is simply that the libertarian position is able to explain the origin of evil by appealing to a free choice of the creature *that could have been otherwise*. The compatibilist, by contrast, must regard this choice as one that was determined by God and (from the creature's perspective) *could not have been otherwise*. After all, the creature, in the compatibilist scheme, has no real control over his actions, for these are all causally determined by forces external to the agent (and ultimately, by God himself).

Fourth, unless we have a measure of libertarian freedom, it is hard to understand how God can *fairly* hold us morally responsible for our actions. If God has predetermined what we shall do, and we cannot do otherwise, then it is very difficult to see how “the judge of all the earth” can “do right” in holding us morally responsible for acts over which we have no control (Gen 18:25). As Flint observes, “moral responsibility seems hard to square with the kind of external determination countenanced by compatibilists.”³⁵

Finally, as D. A. Carson, himself a compatibilist, reminds us, men are tested by God and rewarded for their obedience. But promises of reward, says Carson, “appear utterly ridiculous if human responsibility is not presupposed.”³⁶ However, as we have already seen in the preceding points, “human responsibility” makes better sense given a libertarian conception of human freedom. For these reasons, then, as well as many others that have not been mentioned,³⁷ it seems plausible to believe that we do possess at least some measure of libertarian freedom. And if this is so, and if we also want to maintain a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty, meticulous providence, and exhaustive foreknowledge, “then Molinism,” as William Hasker reminds us, “is the only game in town.”³⁸

To bring all this to bear on the central point of this paper, since a Molinist approach adheres to a libertarian view of human freedom, it seems to me that it is better able to account for Peterson’s notion that hell is populated by those who have *misused their freedom* by sinning. On Peterson’s view, it’s extremely difficult to see how people can be said to have “misused” their

³⁵ Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 28.

³⁶ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, New Foundations Theological Library, ed. Peter Toon and Ralph P. Martin (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 21.

³⁷ Carson, in fact, lists nine distinct reasons, drawn from the Old Testament, for believing that human beings are morally responsible before God. If the arguments above are correct, however, it seems that all nine of his reasons would fit better within a libertarian model of human freedom, rather than the compatibilist model which Carson himself embraces. See Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility*, 18-23.

³⁸ William Hasker, “Response to Thomas Flint,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 60, no. 1/2 (Sep-Oct. 1990): 118. Of course, Hasker himself is not a Molinist, but an Open Theist. Nevertheless, he recognizes that if one wants to combine a strong view of divine sovereignty with a libertarian view of human freedom, then Molinism is the only plausible model available.

freedom, since they cannot (according to Peterson) do anything other than what God has determined them to do. By contrast, a Molinist perspective allows us to easily understand how people can be condemned by God for misusing their freedom. For on a Molinist perspective, the individuals could have always done *other* than what they did (assuming that what they did was characterized by libertarian freedom). And since they could have done otherwise, they are morally responsible before God for the way in which they misused the gift of freedom. For this reason, each person can be fairly judged before the great white throne “according to what he had done” (Rev 20:13).

Predestination and Reprobation

What is distinctive about a Molinist approach to the doctrines of predestination and reprobation—and how does it differ from Peterson’s perspective? According to Peterson, “Reprobation refers to God’s passing over those whom he allows to pay the penalty for their sins.”³⁹ He conceives of election and reprobation “asymmetrically.” God actively chooses the elect for salvation, “but he is passive in reprobation, allowing sinners to receive what their sins deserve.”⁴⁰ What they deserve, of course, is hell. And Peterson describes hell as the place where God’s “complete fury is unleashed against Satan, his angels, and wicked human beings.”⁴¹

For many people, the difficulty with this view is not that God would choose some for salvation, but pass over others. After all, no one is treated unfairly on such a view. The elect receive grace and mercy, which is better than they deserve. And the reprobate are justly punished for their sins, which is no worse than they deserve. It is, however, a bit troubling to contemplate a God whose “complete fury is unleashed against . . . wicked human beings” who were only doing what God had determined them to do. And on Peterson’s view, this is precisely what we

³⁹ Peterson, “Systematic Theology: Three Vantage Points of Hell,” 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

have. Not only does this seem morally problematic, it also seems to strike at the very heart of the character of God and to raise serious questions about his goodness, love, and justice.

But Peterson's view is troubling for yet another reason. According to Scripture, God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Indeed, it was for this reason that he sent his Son, "who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Tim 2:6). In doing this, the Bible tells us, God was motivated by his great love for the world (John 3:16). And even now, we are told, he delays the coming of his Son in judgment because he is patient with us, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

It is difficult to see how Peterson's view is consistent with a straightforward reading of these texts. For on Peterson's view, the *only* reason that all men are not saved is simply because God does not want them saved—a conclusion which seems to be at odds with Scripture (e.g. 1 Tim 2:4). Indeed, if Peterson's view is correct, we are led to the uncomfortable conclusion that God *could* have saved all men, but that he *prefers* to damn them instead, unleashing his "complete fury" (according to Peterson) against them in hell. For reasons such as these, it seems that if there is a view that would enable us to uphold the Scriptural affirmations concerning God's morally perfect character, along with the affirmations we've just considered regarding his desire that all men be saved, all the while enabling us to understand how (and why) it is that all men are not, in fact, saved, we should give serious consideration to it. Although it is controversial (and has some difficulties of its own), I want to argue that Molinism provides a possible (and maybe even plausible) solution to the difficulties besetting Peterson's view.

So how might a Molinist handle the difficult issues of predestination and reprobation? We've already seen that God, by means of middle knowledge, knows what any libertarianly free person would do in any circumstances in which He might place him. Moreover, we've seen that God possesses this knowledge logically prior to deciding which world to actualize. He thus has pre-volitional knowledge of how any human being would respond to his gracious initiative in salvation in any circumstances in which he might choose to place that person. This is not only true of all those persons who actually exist; it is also true of an infinite number of "hypothetical

persons” who *would have* existed had God chosen to create them, but whom he deems it prudent not to actualize (for one reason or another). In sovereignly choosing to actualize a particular world, therefore, God also sovereignly elects all those persons who will not ultimately resist His grace in that world (and who will, therefore, be saved).⁴² The non-elect, or reprobate, are those who will freely resist His grace and thus remain lost in that world. Even so, since God provides the grace necessary for these persons to be saved, they have no one but themselves to blame for their ultimate fate. Each one of these persons really was free to quit resisting God’s grace—and would have inevitably been brought to saving faith in Christ had they simply done so.⁴³

Does this, then, mean that it is ultimately up to us whether or not we are predestined to salvation? *No; it does not.* The particular identities of the “elect” and “non-elect” vary from world to world. Those who are elect in the actual world might not have been elect had God chosen a different world. Since God chooses which world to actualize for His own good reasons, the predestination of particular individuals in the world that God has chosen is wholly gratuitous and unconditional (for God could have chosen some other world in which these same individuals would have been reprobate or would not have existed). In this sense, who is elect and who isn’t depends entirely upon God’s free choice, for he freely and sovereignly chooses which world to actualize. Kirk MacGregor sums up Molina’s views on election and reprobation this way:

Molina insists that no reason can be given concerning why God selected one feasible world over a host of others except for his sovereign will. Since this predestinary choice is

⁴² Craig writes of Molina’s view, “In the final analysis, the act of predestination is simply God’s instantiating one of the world orders known to him via his middle knowledge.” See William Lane Craig, “Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 156.

⁴³ This, in a nutshell, is what Kenneth Keathley refers to as the “ambulatory model of overcoming grace.” According to this model, God’s grace is monergistic, but resistible. Keathley describes the model this way: “If you believe, it is because (and only because) the Holy Spirit brought you to faith. If you do not believe, it is only because you resisted. The only thing you are able to ‘do’ is negative. Thus the ambulatory model provides for a monergistic work of grace that leaves room for the sinner to refuse to accept.” See Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 104. To those who object that ceasing to resist God’s grace is a choice and should thus lead us to ask why it is that one person quits resisting God’s grace while another does not, Keathley points to the work of a number of contemporary philosophers who show that “omissions are not efficient causes.” Some have referred to omissions as “quasi-causal” in nature “because they control events but do not cause events” (105n11). In other words, we are only able to “bring about” our damnation—not our salvation.

in no way predicated upon how any person in that world would respond to his grace, Molina's theology, as well as his biblical exegesis, champions the doctrine of unconditional election. Thus God's choosing to elect or reprobate certain individuals by creating a world in which they would or would not attain to salvation rather than another world where they would freely do the opposite or not even exist has nothing to do with their merits or demerits; God simply, in his absolute sovereignty, selects the world he wants.⁴⁴

But if God truly desires the salvation of all people, then why didn't he actualize a world in which everyone is freely saved? Since such a world is logically possible, why didn't God choose it over the actual world? Although such a world is indeed logically possible, it may nonetheless not have been feasible for God to actualize such a world.⁴⁵ Utilizing certain ideas originally propounded by Alvin Plantinga in his Free Will Defense against the problem of evil,⁴⁶ Craig argues that, given human freedom, it may be the case that there just was *no feasible world* available to God in which everyone would have been saved.⁴⁷ Alternatively, he suggests, even if there had been feasible worlds of universal salvation available to God, they may have had some serious drawbacks, which may thus have led God to prefer the actual world over these other worlds. For example, says Craig, suppose that all the feasible worlds of universal salvation were populated by no more than a few people. Would God be morally obligated to choose one of these worlds, rather than the actual world? Craig doesn't think so:

Why should the joy and blessedness of those who would receive God's grace and love be prevented on account of those who would freely spurn it? An omnibenevolent God might want as many creatures as possible to share salvation; but given certain true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, God, in order to have a multitude in heaven, might have to accept a number in hell.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*, 78.

⁴⁵ Remember that feasible worlds constitute the infinite subset of all logically possible worlds that allow for libertarian human freedom. Usually this is stated in terms of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (i.e. those true propositions describing what a creature would freely do in any particular set of circumstances). According to Molinists, God knows the truth value of all such counterfactuals by means of his middle knowledge.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 164-95.

⁴⁷ See William Lane Craig, "No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1989): 179-82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 182.

Whereas Molina didn't speculate as to why God chose this world rather than another, Craig suggests that maybe God was motivated by a desire to fill heaven with multitudes of the redeemed.⁴⁹ Naturally, this would require actualizing a world with multitudes of people. But what if the price of creating a world with a multitude of redeemed persons is creating a world with a multitude of unredeemed persons? In that case, says Craig, we might think that God's goal in selecting a particular feasible world is to choose one with an "optimal balance" between the saved and the lost; that is, "to create no more lost than is necessary to achieve a certain number of the saved."⁵⁰ But, of course, notes Craig, it's possible that the actual world *is* such a world. In other words, Craig is suggesting that it's possible, given God's desire to create a world of libertarianly free creatures *and* to fill heaven with multitudes of the redeemed, that God had to accept, as one of the tragic consequences of such a world, that many would freely reject his grace and so be lost. "It is possible," suggests Craig, "that the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell and that in any other possible world which was feasible for God the balance between saved and lost was worse."⁵¹ In this way one can consistently hold that God genuinely desires the salvation of all men, and provides the necessary grace for all to be saved, even though he knows, via his middle knowledge, that many of these people will freely reject his grace and ultimately be lost. In this respect, the fate of the lost is contrary to God's antecedent will (that all should be saved), even though it is consistent with his consequent will (that some should be freely lost).⁵² The Molinist perspective, therefore, not only offers a plausible interpretation of the doctrines of predestination and reprobation, it also provides the means to understand how these doctrines are consistent with the Scriptural declarations that God wants all men to be saved. And this, at least in my opinion, is a serious advantage over Peterson's view.

⁴⁹ Ibid.: 183.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 58-62.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a Molinist perspective, rooted in the doctrine of divine middle knowledge, offers a better way of accounting for the population of hell than the model advanced by Robert Peterson. In the first place, since Molinism embraces a libertarian conception of human freedom, it is better equipped to account for Peterson's notion that hell is populated by those who have *misused* their freedom by sinning. On Peterson's view, it is very difficult to understand how human beings can be said to have "misused" their freedom, since everything they do has been causally determined by forces beyond their control, and ultimately by God himself. Since people have no real control over their actions in this view it seems inaccurate (and even unfair) to describe their actions as a "misuse of human freedom." By contrast, the Molinist perspective has no difficulties accounting for the notion of misused human freedom. For according to this perspective, since the people in question were free to do something other than what they did, they are rightly held to be morally responsible for whatever actions they did take.

Secondly, by offering a plausible interpretation of the doctrines of predestination and reprobation that is consistent with the Scriptural statements that God wants all men to be saved, the Molinist perspective is characterized by greater explanatory scope than Peterson's view and is thus a better explanation. On Peterson's view, it is not really true that God wants all men to be saved (for if he did, he would have saved them). By contrast, the Molinist perspective can reconcile those passages which speak of God eternally electing some for salvation (e.g. Eph 1:4-5, 11) with those other passages which speak of God's universal salvific will for all men (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Indeed, it is for reasons such as these that Craig has described the doctrine of middle knowledge as the "most fruitful theological concept" that he has ever encountered.⁵³ For these reasons, then, it seems to me that a Molinist model is the better of the two options.

⁵³ Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," 125.

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