

DIVINE CONTROL AND HUMAN FREEDOM: IS MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE THE ANSWER?

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Conservative Christians have normally wished to affirm both of the following tenets:

- T1. Humans are free with respect to certain actions and, therefore, responsible for them.
- T2. God is omnipotent in the sense that he has (sovereign, providential) control over all earthly affairs.

Why this is so is quite obvious. If T1 is denied, it is difficult to make sense of the standard Christian belief that God can justifiably discipline human agents when they perform actions that violate his commands—that is, it is difficult to make sense of the basic Christian concepts of sin and punishment. T2 appears equally important. If it is denied, it is difficult to make sense of many other standard Christian beliefs—for example, that God is in control of our lives, or that God will bring about his desired goals regardless of the actions of humans, or that God is capable of responding in a positive manner to any petitionary prayer that is in keeping with his will.

But of course to affirm both of these tenets simultaneously generates a well-known *prima facie* conflict. If humans are held to be causally (and thus morally) responsible for certain states of affairs (if we affirm T1), it is difficult to see how God can bring about the exact state of affairs he desires in every case and, thus, difficult to see how it can be said that God has total control over all earthly events. An analogous *prima facie* problem obviously arises in relation to human freedom if we first assume that God has control over all earthly affairs (if we first assume T2).

Moreover this is not a tension that is experienced by the layperson alone. As Robert R. Cook has recently written: "Harmonizing these two Scriptural themes has vexed the minds of the greatest theologians."¹ Not surprisingly, though, a number of solutions continue to be proposed.

Those who call themselves theological compatibilists believe that the answer lies in a proper understanding of what it means for a person to act in a free and responsible manner. Such compatibilists, like their secular counterparts, believe that a sufficient basis for deciding whether a person has acted freely is deciding whether she has done what she has decided (willed) to do. If she has been forced to act against her will, then she has

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¹ R. R. Cook, "God, Middle Knowledge and Alternative Worlds," *EvQ* 62 (1990) 301.

not acted freely. But if she is doing what she has decided to do, then she has acted freely and is responsible for her actions, even if external factors allowed for no other decision to be made. Accordingly, just as compatibilists in general believe that a person has acted freely and is responsible for her actions even if hereditary and environmental factors have inevitably brought it about that she has chosen to act as she did, theological compatibilists also believe an individual remains free and responsible for her actions even in those cases where God irresistibly brings it about that she desires to do exactly what he has decided she should do.²

This perspective certainly does preserve a very strong reading of T2, a strong sense of divine control. Since nothing, including human freedom, can thwart God's creative power, God is never surprised. Nor need he ever rely on luck or take any risks. Rather, freely-made decisions simply function as desired building blocks in God's preordained creative plan, a plan that is always working itself out in the exact manner God intended. Moreover, since God could have created anything of which he can conceive, the world in which we live must be viewed as the best creative option in the sense that God cannot envision any world that is more desirable.³ To grant this, of course, does not entail that this world does not contain any individual occurrences that God finds intrinsically undesirable—for example, it does not entail that God views the painful death of a child as an intrinsically desirable state of affairs. But any such occurrence must be viewed as a necessary component in this world in the sense that this world would be less desirable overall if it were not present. And in this sense, accordingly, it follows that God is never disappointed.

This deterministic perspective also offers an acceptable reading of T1 for those who affirm a compatibilist conception of human freedom. Those who identify themselves as theological indeterminists, however, do not find this conception of freedom acceptable. They agree that a person has acted freely only when she has done what she has decided to do. But they do not believe that the question of whether a person has done what she has decided to do is sufficient to determine freedom and responsibility. It is also necessary, they feel, to determine why a person has made the decision in question. And they maintain that if external factors allowed for no other decision to be made, then the individual in question has not acted freely, even if she has done what she has decided to do. Accordingly, inde-

² One of the best current defenses of theological determinism is given by J. Feinberg in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. D. and R. Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 19–43.

³ Technically speaking, there may be no best world of which God can conceive in that there may be no upper limit to goodness or desirability in the divine mind. That is, for any world that might be said to be the best there may be another world of which God can conceive that would be even better in some way—for example, contain one more happy person. But it does, I believe, make sense to speak of an ideal set of worlds—a set of worlds that contain all and only that which God finds intrinsically or instrumentally desirable in a world—so “best” can at least be thought of as referring to a world in this category. For a fuller explanation of this issue see D. Basinger, “Divine Omniscience and the Best of All Possible Worlds,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982) 143–148.

terminists argue that just as a person cannot be said to have acted freely if hereditary and environmental influences rendered her decision to act in a certain manner inevitable, so too a person cannot be said to have acted freely if the decision-making process in question was irresistibly influenced by God. That is, they maintain that if God brings it about that the person decides to do something, then the person cannot be said to have acted freely, even though it is true that she is doing what she has decided to do.⁴

This indeterministic perspective certainly preserves a strong reading of T1, a strong sense of human freedom. But what does this mean for T2, for God's control of earthly affairs? According to some indeterminists, T2 is not weakened at all. God retains total control over everything, including human freedom, to the same degree as that affirmed by the theological compatibilist. But how can this be? If God cannot irresistibly influence human decision-making in such a way that humans will always decide to do freely exactly what God has decided they should do, then how can God retain total control over human behavior?

As the indeterminists in question see it, this is imply an insoluble paradox that a proper reading of Scripture requires us to affirm. In the words of R. B. Kuiper, for example, what we find in Scripture in this case are not just "truths which are difficult to reconcile but can be recognized before the bar of human reason," but rather two truths "taught unmistakably in the infallible Word of God" that "cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason."⁵ Such truths, proponents of this perspective are quick to add, are not really contradictory from God's perspective. But they are truths, as J. I. Packer tells us, that "we cannot expect to [reconcile] in this world." They will always remain incompatible from a human perspective. We as faithful Christians must simply come to recognize and accept this fact.⁶

Critics, however, view this line of reasoning as confused. The issue here, they argue, is not whether one is a faithful Christian or has a high view of Scripture or believes that God is in some way above human logic. Rather, the fundamental issue, as they see it, is one of meaning. Just as humans cannot conceive of square circles because the two concepts in question are incompatible, humans cannot conceive of decisions that are truly free in an indeterministic sense and yet totally controlled by God. In both cases what we have is an inconsistent concept that is meaningless at the human level, whatever may be the case from God's perspective.⁷

But where does this leave the indeterminist who finds this criticism convincing? What then happens to T2, to God's control? The answer depends

⁴ A good defense of this perspective is offered by B. Reichenbach in *Predestination* (ed. D. and R. Basinger) 101–124.

⁵ R. B. Kuiper, *The Voice of Authority* (ed. G. W. Marston; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960) 16.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1961) 24.

⁷ Cf. e.g. D. Basinger, "Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?", *JETS* 30 (June 1987) 205–213.

on the type of knowledge that God is thought to possess. All nonparadox indeterminists maintain that God is omniscient in the sense that God knows all that can be known. But they differ radically on what they believe can be known.

Some believe that God possesses what we shall call present knowledge. They believe that God knows all that has occurred in the past, is occurring now, and that which will follow deterministically from what has already occurred. But they deny that God necessarily knows all that will occur in the future. Specifically they argue that since God cannot control how humans utilize their freedom, God does not know exactly what will come about as the result of those freely-made decisions that have not yet been made.⁸

Not surprisingly, such indeterminists conceive of T2—God's control of earthly affairs—in a manner quite different from the way it is conceived of by theological compatibilists or paradox indeterminists. For the compatibilist and paradox indeterminist, this is a world in which God is working out his exact preordained plan. He is never surprised, need never depend on luck, need never take any risks. And since this is the best of all possible worlds he cannot be disappointed at all in the total outcome. But for the nonparadox indeterminists in question, the situation is quite different. Since God can conceive of all possible scenarios beforehand, nothing that occurs is a total surprise to him. Moreover a world containing freedom may well be the best type of world of which God can conceive. And God can still be said to have set out the parameters and reserved the right to intervene unilaterally upon occasion.

But to the extent that God grants individuals freedom, God is in a very real sense a risk-taker. Since what occurs when individuals are utilizing their freedom must be acknowledged to have occurred as the result of free choice rather than divine dictate, it can no longer be said that God is working out an ideal, preordained plan. Rather, God may well find himself disappointed in the sense that this world may fall far short of that ideal world God wishes were coming about. It may even be the case that this world contains many intrinsically undesirable states of affairs that are not necessary conditions for a greater good. Some undesirable states of affairs may simply be the unavoidable by-product of a free choice. That is, many states of affairs may be, in the words of William Hasker, "pure loss."⁹

Other nonparadox indeterminists believe that God possesses what is currently called simple foreknowledge. They believe that God knows not only what has occurred and is occurring but also all that will actually occur in the future.¹⁰

To view God in this manner does allow for a slightly different reading of T2, a slightly different understanding of God's control over earthly affairs. Since God knows now all that will ever happen in this world, noth-

⁸ Clark Pinnock is perhaps the best known evangelical who affirms this position; see *Predestination* (ed. D. and R. Basinger) 156–158.

⁹ W. Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989) 204.

¹⁰ A good discussion of this perspective can be found in *ibid.* 53–63.

ing surprises God now. He is now taking no risks. But before God decided (logically speaking) which of the numerous creative options open to him to initiate, there was no actual world. And thus since a God with simple foreknowledge knows only what will actually occur in the future, until he had decided which creative option to initiate he had no way of knowing exactly what would occur given the actualization of any of these options. Specifically God had no way of knowing to what extent the free choices that would be made in any of these worlds he could bring into being would be in keeping with his will. And in this sense a God with simple foreknowledge must again in a very real sense be viewed as a risk-taker. He could have been lucky. This world may happen to be exactly what he wants. But he may have been surprised and disappointed in what he discovered would actually be occurring. Specifically, after making his creative choice God may have come to see that this world contains some intrinsically undesirable occurrences that are not necessary in the sense that they lead to a greater good. We may still have "pure loss." And accordingly it remains the case that this may not be the best world of which God can conceive.

In short, as I and others have argued elsewhere, a God who possesses simple foreknowledge and desires to actualize a world containing significant freedom is for all practical purposes in no better position to control earthly affairs than is a God with present knowledge.¹¹

But there is yet another way in which some nonparadox indeterminists conceive of God's knowledge. They believe that God possesses what is called middle knowledge. That is, they believe that God knows not only what has happened, is happening, and will actually happen in the future, but also what every individual would freely do in every possible situation in which that individual could find himself or herself.¹²

Moreover, many of these indeterminists believe that middle knowledge is the key to a new, exciting approach to the relationship between human freedom and divine control—that is, a new and exciting way through the "horns of [this] dilemma."¹³ Specifically they believe that to grant God middle knowledge offers the Christian a way of understanding how it can be true that humans have indeterministic freedom and yet at the same time also be true that God is in complete control of earthly affairs in the sense that this world is the outworking of God's preordained plan. Or, stated differently, these indeterminists believe that to grant God middle knowledge allows the Christian to affirm a reading of T2—an understanding of God's power—that is quite similar to that affirmed by the theological compatibilist and paradox indeterminist without denying that humans possess indeterministic freedom or appealing to paradox.

¹¹ See D. Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Theism," *RelS* 22 (1986) 407–422.

¹² One of the clearest introductions to middle knowledge can be found in W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 127–151.

¹³ Cook, "Middle" 301–302.

But how exactly is this supposed to work? According to William Craig, the leading evangelical proponent of middle knowledge, the answer is rather straightforward:

Since [a God with middle knowledge] knows what any free creature would do in any situation, he can, by creating the appropriate situations, bring it about that creatures will achieve his ends and purposes and that they will do so *freely*. . . . In his infinite intelligence, God is able to plan a world in which his designs are achieved by creatures acting freely.¹⁴

A specific illustration may help clarify what Craig seems to have in mind. Let us suppose that I want my six-year-old daughter Nissa to read ten pages of Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham* before bed tonight. If I possess the power of the God of theological compatibilism, I can simply irresistibly influence her will in such a way that she will decide freely to read the pages in question. If I possess the power of the God of the paradox indeterminist, I can in some mysterious way again bring it about that she will freely (in an indeterminist sense) read the pages I want her to read. Things are quite different, however, if I possess the power of the God of the nonparadox indeterminist who affirms only present knowledge of simple foreknowledge. In this case, to the extent that I allow Nissa to choose freely what to read I cannot guarantee that she will read the pages I want her to read. I can of course still make her read the ten pages, but then she will not be doing so freely. I cannot not have it both ways.

But if I possess the power of the God of the nonparadox indeterminist who affirms middle knowledge, then I am again in a much stronger position. I still cannot make Nissa decide freely to do what I want her to do in any situation. But I do know how she will respond freely in every possible situation in which I could request (in a noncoercive manner) that she read the ten pages I have in mind. I know, for example, how she would respond if I asked her in a soft voice right after dinner, how she would respond if I waited until right before she goes to bed, how she would respond if I told her that her teacher wanted her to read these pages, and so on. Now let us suppose that I see with my middle knowledge that Nissa will freely choose to read the desired pages if I ask her to do so in a soft voice right before bed. In this case I again possess the power to control what Nissa freely reads. By asking her to read the desired pages in a soft voice right before bed, I can bring it about that she will do exactly what I want, but she will still be acting freely in the sense understood by the indeterminist.

And, as Craig sees it, a God with middle knowledge can employ this same technique to bring about exactly what he wants in all cases. God cannot make us freely desire to do exactly what he wants in any situation. But since God knows what we will freely decide to do in every possible set of circumstances, God can simply bring about those circumstances (that situation) in which he knows we will freely decide to do exactly what he wants done. And in this way he can "plan a world in which his designs are

¹⁴ Craig, *Only* 135.

achieved by creatures acting freely." Craig grants that this is a very complex undertaking for God, given all the free choices involved. But in his mind this only makes God more awe-inspiring.¹⁵

How ought we to respond to this line of reasoning? It is certainly true that a God with middle knowledge has the potential for more control over earthly affairs than does a God with only present knowledge or simple foreknowledge. A being who knows ahead of time exactly how things will turn out, given all the available options, does in principle have a decided advantage over a being who does not have this type of comparative foreknowledge. But is it true that a God with middle knowledge—like the God of the theological determinist and paradox indeterminist—can always bring it about that we "will achieve his ends and purposes and that [we] will do so freely"?

In one sense the answer is clearly no. Let us again return to my daughter's scenario. If I see with my middle knowledge that there does exist a situation I can bring about in which she will freely choose to do exactly what I want done, then I can bring it about that Nissa "will achieve [my] ends and purposes and that [she] will do so freely."

But does such a situation actually exist? Will there exist an actualizable situation in which Nissa freely does what I want her to do? Craig's comments imply that the answer is yes. But this is incorrect. Since we are assuming that Nissa possesses indeterministic freedom in every one of the different situations (differing sets of circumstances) in which her choice to read can be made, it is possible that she will choose freely not to read the pages in question in even one of these situations. That is, there may be no actualizable situation in which she freely reads the pages in question. And if this is the case, then even though I still retain my power to see what she will freely decide to do in every context I no longer possess the power to bring it about that she will read the pages in question freely. I must either take away her freedom or settle for something less than I had originally wanted.

And the same is true for each of us in relation to a God who possesses middle knowledge. It may be that by creating the appropriate situation God can always bring it about that what we freely decide to do is what "will achieve his ends and purposes." But with respect to some (or even many) of these ends and purposes, there may be no such appropriate situation for God to create.

Or, to state this important point differently, a God with middle knowledge might be quite lucky. With respect to all or most of God's "ends and purposes" he might be able to see that there are actualizable situations in which individuals freely choose to do what he desires. But then again he might be quite unlucky. He might see with respect to many or most of his "ends and purposes" that there are few, if any, actualizable situations in which individuals freely choose to do what he wants done.

So it is quite misleading to say that a God with middle knowledge can "plan" the world he wants in the sense that he can, "by creating the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

appropriate situations, bring it about that creatures will achieve his ends and purposes and that they will do so freely." This certainly is the case for the God of the theological compatibilist or paradox indeterminist. This God can use free choices as building blocks in designing the world of his choice. But since a God with middle knowledge cannot control what we will choose to do in any situation in which we possess meaningful freedom, it can hardly be said that middle knowledge allows God to "plan" the world he wants in the sense that he can insure that the most desirable "ends and purposes" of which he can conceive will always be achieved. Rather, it is possible for a God with middle knowledge to find himself disappointed in the sense that he may often have to settle for much less than the ideal.

But for how much less than the ideal might he have to settle? Specifically, might he have to allow for the occurrence of intrinsically undesirable states of affairs that lead to no greater good? In one sense, the answer is no. Since a God with middle knowledge sees every situation in which any individual freely brings about intrinsically undesirable states of affairs that lead to no greater good, he can insure that no such state of affairs will actually occur simply by choosing not to actualize any of these situations.

Since a God with middle knowledge cannot control what individuals will do freely in any specific situation, however, it may be that with respect to any given end or purpose that God has in mind there is no actualizable situation in which individuals do not misuse their freedom in such a way that no "pure loss" is generated. Moreover most indeterminists—including most of those who believe that God possesses middle knowledge—believe that God has chosen to create a world in which humans possess significant (indeterministic) freedom most of the time. But if this is true, then it may be that a God with middle knowledge cannot insure that this world will contain no "pure loss" no matter how many creative scenarios he considers. Only the God of the theological compatibilist or the paradox indeterminist can grant humans liberal amounts of significant freedom and yet insure that no "pure loss" will be produced.

Perhaps, however, the proponent of middle knowledge who desires a strong reading of T2—God's control—need not give up so easily. It is true, it might be argued, that the fact that God possesses middle knowledge does not itself insure that "creatures will achieve his ends and purposes and that they will do so freely." But even though a God with middle knowledge cannot control what any individual will freely choose to do in any given situation, it is still possible that such a God saw before creation that there was a world he could actualize in which all individuals happen always to choose to do freely exactly what he would like them to do. Moreover let us assume that before creation this is in fact exactly what God saw. In short, let us assume that before creation God knew he would in fact be able to bring about a world in which his creatures would always "achieve his ends and purposes" and that they would "do so freely." And finally let us assume that God has shared with us in Scripture that this is in fact the exact world he is bringing about—that is, let us assume that God has told us in Scrip-

ture that he is in fact bringing into existence a world in which everyone always “achieves his ends and purposes” and “[does] so freely.” Under these conditions, it might be concluded, it can justifiably be said that a God with middle knowledge possesses as much control over earthly affairs—possesses as strong a reading of T2—as that possessed by the God of the theological compatibilist or paradox indeterminist.¹⁶

Now of course whether we are in fact told in Scripture that God’s “ends and purposes” are always achieved remains the subject of intense debate, even within evangelical circles. But if we grant that God did have the option of creating such a world and has told us in Scripture that he has done so, is it not true that the proponent of middle knowledge can justifiably affirm a reading of T2—an understanding of God’s control—that is as strong as that affirmed by the theological compatibilist or paradox indeterminist?

In one sense, I believe the answer is yes. If the assumptions in question are granted, then there appears to be no reason why it cannot be maintained justifiably that our world is one in which we “achieve [God’s] ends and purposes” and “do so freely.” But some important clarifications are necessary.

First, it must be noted that an indeterminist need not be a proponent of middle knowledge to utilize this line of reasoning. It is also possible (although less likely) that a God with only simple foreknowledge saw after his creative decision that this would be a world in which his creatures would always “achieve his ends and purposes” and “do so freely” and then shared this information with us in Scripture.

Second, it is important to emphasize that, even if a God with middle knowledge has brought about a world in which his ends and purposes are always achieved freely, such a being is not as powerful as is the God of the theological compatibilist or paradox indeterminist. The God of the theological compatibilist and paradox indeterminist is limited only by logical possibility. He could have created any possible world but chose to actualize this one—including those free choices involved—because it is the manifestation of his ideal creative plan. A God with middle knowledge, however, is not limited simply by logical possibility. With respect to those creative options that include significant freedom, God is limited by what he sees that those with freedom will in fact do with it. Or, to put it more directly, if God has middle knowledge and desires a world containing significant freedom, then his creative options are limited by something over which he has no control—namely, how individuals will use their freedom in any given situation in which they are allowed to do so. Thus even if this world is exactly what God wants, it must be remembered that for a God with middle knowledge this is so only because God had the good fortune to see that he would be able to actualize a world in which all individuals would always freely choose to do exactly what he wants done.

Finally, it must be emphasized explicitly that, while a proponent of theological compatibilism or paradox indeterminism must maintain that

¹⁶ To my knowledge, no one as yet has explicitly utilized this line of reasoning. But it is quite possible that proponents of middle knowledge will soon realize its potential.

there exists no more desirable world of which God can conceive—and thus that all evil is necessary—a proponent of middle knowledge need not do so. If it is assumed that God did not see the best as a creative option, then the proponent of middle knowledge can justifiably maintain that this world not only is less than ideal but even that it may be disappointing in the sense that it contains some “pure loss.”

But why would a proponent of middle knowledge want to maintain any such thing? Why would she or he not want to maintain that this world contains no “pure loss” if this is possible? The answer is related to the problem of evil. There are two basic theodicies. Proponents of the greater-good defense maintain that there is no unnecessary evil, no “pure loss.” All events stand as necessary components in the unfolding of God’s perfect plan. Proponents of the free-will defense, on the other hand, maintain that some evil is “pure loss,” the result of human decision-making over which God voluntarily gave up control by granting humans significant freedom.

Now let us suppose—as happens to be the case—that some proponents of middle knowledge want to utilize the free-will defense. Then of course they need to maintain that God was not able to bring about the exact world he wanted, for otherwise there could be no “pure loss.” Or, to state the general point differently, to the extent that the proponent of middle knowledge wants to utilize the free-will defense, she or he must opt for a weaker reading of T2—of God’s control—than that affirmed by the theological compatibilist or paradox indeterminist. The proponent of middle knowledge cannot have it both ways.

Where does all this leave us? Is middle knowledge the answer to the freedom/sovereignty tension for nonparadox indeterminists? A God with middle knowledge is in a position to exercise more control over earthly affairs than is a God with present knowledge or simple foreknowledge. In fact, such a God might be fortunate enough to get exactly what he wants. But the fact that he possesses middle knowledge does not itself guarantee such success. And thus he cannot be considered as powerful as the God of theological determinism or paradox indeterminism. Moreover, it is not clear that those nonparadox indeterminists who believe that God does have middle knowledge should attempt to argue that he has been successful in this sense. At the very least, they would be wise to consider the costs carefully before doing so.