

## GOD AND COUNTERFACTUALS

by  
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### INTRODUCTION

There is a wide disparity of belief today within evangelicalism concerning the extent of God's knowledge. Some believe God knows all things exhaustively while others say that the future is *open*, that is, that God does not know some things about the future, particularly the free choices of his creatures.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the former view is presupposed, namely that *what* God knows about the world includes everything: the past, present, future, and all true contingents.

Another question is *how* God knows all of this information. Some evangelicals maintain that God “just knows” the way things are (or were or will be) by virtue of simple, intuitive foreknowledge.<sup>3</sup> Others consider God's decree to be the logical prerequisite to his knowledge.<sup>4</sup> An in-between view advances the notion that God intuitively knows the free choices of creatures in every possible circumstance, in advance of creating those creatures, and that he uses that knowledge to decide how to create the world; then he knows everything by virtue of his decision. This view is called *middle knowledge* (hereafter abbreviated MK) and it is hybrid in that God's knowledge of things is partly intuitive, and partly decree-based.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>On the exhaustive view, see John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), p. 312. For the open view, refer to James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, “Introduction” to *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 10; and later in the same volume Gregory A. Boyd, “The Open-Theism View.” Boyd writes, “The Lord can never be caught off guard—for he anticipates all possibilities—he is nevertheless occasionally surprised at the improbable behavior of people” (p. 24).

<sup>3</sup>The simple foreknowledge view is advanced by David Hunt, “The Simple-Foreknowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 67. He is sympathetic to the “time telescope” view of how God achieves this knowledge, but his “official” position on the mechanism of divine foreknowledge will be agnostic.

<sup>4</sup>See Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, p. 308: “Aquinas says that God has this knowledge [of vision] because God willed to create the world as it is.”

<sup>5</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It? The*

Even more challenging is the related question of how God knows outcomes that “could” or “would” be different if slightly different circumstances prevailed. Such hypotheticals are called *counterfactuals*, and how God knows them is the subject of this essay. There are several explanations offered by evangelicals as to how God knows them. He may intuitively just know counterfactuals (an extension of the simple foreknowledge view). He may know them in his natural knowledge of himself and all possibilities, logically before his decree.<sup>6</sup> Or, he may know them logically after his decree as part of his free knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The MK view also has an explanation for this question. MK is based on two major tenets: first, this type of God’s knowledge comes logically before his decree (it is pre-volitional); and second, this knowledge assumes libertarian human freedom. The two supporting tenets make the view untenable for many Bible believers. So some theologians answer the “how” question about counterfactuals with a modified version of MK called *Calvinistic middle knowledge* (hereafter abbreviated CMK). It rejects the libertarian assumption but retains the pre-volitional assumption of stock MK.

The goal of this essay is to examine these options and give a biblically and theologically coherent explanation of how God knows counterfactuals. The preferred explanation places God’s knowledge of counterfactuals in his free knowledge, but explains that in another sense, God knows counterfactuals in his natural knowledge.

### Relevance and Need of the Present Study

The notion that God knows counterfactuals seems undisputable from several key biblical texts. These texts include Matthew 2:13; 11:20–24 (parallel Luke 10:13–15); 1 Samuel 23:7–13; Acts 21:10–14; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Exodus 13:17; Jeremiah 26:3; and Jeremiah 38:17–23. God knows them as true propositions in spite of the fact that they do not come to pass. Other counterfactuals we might conjure up are false and God knows they are false, so he does not *know* them as true. It also seems feasible that God knows many more counterfactuals than the ones presented in the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

This study is necessary because there are serious shortcomings in the MK and CMK explanations—both generally and particularly with respect to how God knows counterfactuals. Since these views are presently popular, a careful critique and alternative explanation seems in

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*Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 12. Note that there is no openness to MK: God knows everything in advance.

<sup>6</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p. 503.

<sup>7</sup>This view is suggested by John D. Laing, “The Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge,” *JETS* 47 (September 2004): 467.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of how many counterfactuals God knows, see Postiff, “How God Knows Counterfactuals,” pp. 82–84.

order.

This study is also necessary because counterfactual language is commonly used without due consideration for its God-ward implications. Consider a quote from best-selling author Nassim Nicholas Taleb:

Why [do humans make plans]? The answer has to do with human nature.... There is supposed to be an evolutionary dimension to our need to project matters into the future.... The idea, as promoted by the philosopher Daniel Dennett, is as follows: What is the most potent use of our brain? It is precisely the ability to project conjectures into the future and play the counterfactual game—‘If I punch him in the nose, then he will punch me back right away, or, worse, call his lawyer in New York.’ One of the advantages of doing so is that we can let our conjectures die in our stead. Used correctly and in place of more visceral reactions, the ability to project effectively frees us from immediate, first-order natural selection—as opposed to more primitive organisms that were vulnerable to death and only grew by the improvement in the gene pool through the selection of the best. In a way, projecting allows us to cheat evolution: it now takes place in our head, as a series of projections and counterfactual scenarios.<sup>9</sup>

Achieving the goal of the essay will be beneficial in several respects. Many Christians use the language of contingency and MK without realizing the full implications of it. A sharper understanding of how God knows counterfactuals will impact one’s view of God’s will and guidance, of the doctrines of election and salvation, of the problem of evil, and many other theological matters.

### What Is a Counterfactual?

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to define the term *counterfactual*. A counterfactual in general is a subjunctive hypothetical statement of the form [CF] “If X were the case, then Y would happen.”<sup>10</sup> A *counterfactual of creaturely freedom* is a more specific type of counterfactual where X and Y are given in more detail. It has the form [CCF] “If person S were in state of affairs C, S would freely do (choose) A.” In this definition, C specifies the total set of circumstances of person S, including all circumstances prior to the free choice. The type of freedom envisioned is usually libertarian, but it could also be compatibilistic.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 189.

<sup>10</sup>See *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, s.v. “counterfactual,” p. 519. It defines counterfactual as “a logical conditional whose antecedent is or is presumed to be contrary to fact.”

<sup>11</sup>Pure MK advocates take the libertarian view, although they do not always surface a clear definition of the type of freedom they support. E.g., Eef Dekker, *Middle Knowledge* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), p. 4. Calvinist MK advocates take the compatibilist view. E.g., Terrance Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work*

We can conceive of many possible states of affairs X and actions Y. In the actual world God created, only some of those Xs and Ys actually occur; these are the “facts.” All the Xs and Ys which did not occur would be “counter” facts. A counterfactual is therefore any statement of the form [CF] whose condition X did not or will not prevail. Craig explains it this way: “Counterfactual statements are, by definition, contrary to fact, that is, about circumstances and actions which never in fact exist but only *would* exist if things were to be different.”<sup>12</sup> The truth of such statements “requires only that such actions *would* be taken if the specified circumstances *were* to exist.”<sup>13</sup> So, though many statements have the form [CF], it is only those statements where “if X were the case” is not true that are called counterfactuals.

Hypothetically, all [CF] type statements were equally plausible the logical moment before God’s decree and so all equally “counterfactual.” But once God’s decree was settled the next logical moment, some of the counterfactuals became factual and others became true counterfactuals while others became false counterfactuals.

At a given point in time, two or more statements with the form [CF] may seem equally likely, so that from the human perspective they both seem to be equally “counterfactual.” For instance:

- (1) if David stays in Keilah, Saul will capture him
- (2) if David leaves Keilah, Saul will capture him
- (3) if David stays in Keilah, Saul will not capture him
- (4) if David leaves Keilah, Saul will not capture him

All are of the counterfactual form, but from what we learn in 1 Samuel 23:7–13, not all were true, and only one of them came to pass. Beforehand, they all look like counterfactuals *to us*. However, *God* knew ahead of time that statements [2] and [3] are false. This is because for [2] David did leave Keilah and Saul did not capture him, but for [3] God indicates that if David stayed in Keilah, Saul would have captured him. In [2], the protasis actually occurred, but the apodosis did not. In [3], the protasis did not come to pass (it was counter the facts) but if David had in fact stayed, God indicates that the apodosis would have been false because Saul *would* have captured him. So these are not counterfactuals that God knew as true. After all was said and done, [4] turned out to be the “fact” and [1] the true counterfactual. For [4], both protasis and apodosis came to pass; for [1] the protasis did not come to pass, but had it, God says clearly that the apodosis would have.

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*in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 289.

<sup>12</sup>William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), p. 140.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

We must take care then to be aware of which perspective we are using when we speak of counterfactuals—we may consider some things as “counterfactuals” which are not in fact true counterfactuals, but only have the form [CF]. In this essay, the more restricted definition, from God’s perspective, after his decree, will be used in most instances. This distinction will turn out to be an important foundation for understanding how God knows counterfactuals.

Given this definition of a counterfactual, it should be evident that God “knows” facts in a different sense than he knows counterfactuals. His knowledge of a counterfactual includes that the conditional specifies circumstances that do not come to pass, but that the consequent would have been decreed had the antecedent been part of his decree.

### Roadmap

The next two major sections will critique the MK view and its Calvinistic variant. The following section will advance a more consistently biblical view which integrates God’s knowledge of himself and his decree to explain his knowledge of counterfactuals. The essay concludes with some theological and practical implications of this view.

## THE MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE EXPLANATION

The aim of this section is to explain the middle knowledge view and to examine the theological viability of MK for how God knows counterfactuals. In order to accomplish this aim, the section will first introduce the doctrine of MK. Then, some supporting arguments for MK will be reviewed. Third, some of the varied applications of MK will be outlined. Fourth, arguments against the general idea of MK will be presented, followed by some critique of its explanation as to how God knows counterfactuals.

### What Is Middle Knowledge?

The doctrine of middle knowledge was first formulated by a Spanish Jesuit named Luis de Molina (1535–1600).<sup>14</sup> It is his name that is the source for the other common designation for the doctrine, namely Molinism.<sup>15</sup> Many modern theologians have embraced the doctrine of MK because of its practical utility in explaining the relationship between various doctrines of Scripture. Proponents today include

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<sup>14</sup>Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). This book is a translation of part IV of Molina’s *Concordia*, first published in 1588.

<sup>15</sup>Turretin briefly notes that other Jesuits laid claim to the doctrine, namely Fonseca and Lessius. Molina obviously came to the fore as its inventor as history has attached his name to the doctrine. On this, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 1:213.

William Lane Craig,<sup>16</sup> Eef Dekker,<sup>17</sup> Thomas P. Flint,<sup>18</sup> John David Laing,<sup>19</sup> and Alvin Plantinga.<sup>20</sup>

### Three Logical Parts of God's Knowledge

Before describing the doctrine of MK, it is necessary to lay some groundwork. The doctrine assumes that God's knowledge can be divided into three logical parts, that is, a succession of three components in which the second part is logically conditioned upon the first, and the third upon the second. The three parts are organized logically according to priority, but this organization is not temporal, as God's knowledge is not subject to a division according to time.

The first type of divine knowledge is called *natural* or *necessary knowledge*. It is this knowledge that is inherent in God, and by which he knows all necessary things. These things include knowledge of himself, of right and wrong, of logic, etc. It also includes knowledge of all possible states of affairs. This knowledge is essential to God, before any decision of the divine will.

The second type of divine knowledge will be addressed in the next section. Suffice it to say for now that it is called *middle knowledge* (*scientia media*) in that it stands between the first and third types.

The third type of divine knowledge is called *free knowledge*. This knowledge comes after God's decision to create the world in which we find ourselves. By this point in the logical ordering of God's knowledge, and because of his decision, all the possible states of affairs have been reduced to the set of affairs that actually prevail in the current world. So God by his free knowledge knows all things as they actually are and will be.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Several of Craig's writings will be referenced throughout this essay. For the reader who needs an introduction to middle knowledge, see the popular-level work by Craig, *Only Wise God*, pp. 127–52. This explains Molina's thoughts on a manageable level. A somewhat more technical article appears in William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 141–64. More technical yet are William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 169–206, and idem, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 237–78.

<sup>17</sup>Dekker, *Middle Knowledge*.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup>John David Laing, "Molinism and Supercomprehension: Grounding Counterfactual Truth" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000).

<sup>20</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). Plantinga apparently rediscovered the doctrine of Molinism without knowing of Molina's previous work on the subject.

<sup>21</sup>This distinguishes MK from open theism. Advocates of MK do not believe in an open future, where some decisions of free creatures are unknown to God ahead of time. Instead, logically after God's decision and the subsequent free knowledge that

### Definition of Middle Knowledge

Molina defines the second type of divine knowledge, middle knowledge, as that knowledge standing between God's natural and free knowledge:

Finally, 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.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, God knows what every free agent *would* do in every combination of circumstances in which that agent might find himself. The various choices that the agent faces may not be equally advantageous or palatable, but according to Molina, the agent could select any way he desired—and the way he desired is part of the contents of God's MK. God knows therefore the virtually infinite number of propositions of the form "if person S were in state of affairs C, then S would freely do action A." Another way of putting this is that God knows *counterfactuals of creaturely freedom*.

This type of knowledge is distinct from natural and free knowledge in terms of its logical "timing" and source. It is different than free knowledge in that it comes *before* any decree. It is different than natural knowledge in that it is sourced, in some sense, outside of God. It is related to the free decisions of the creature. As such, this MK is not within God's control, but is dependent on how the free creature would decide in the various circumstances. By saying this, advocates of MK do not suggest this knowledge is really outside of God, but rather that God knows the creatures by knowing himself and the possible essences of creatures.<sup>23</sup> Molina's definition makes this clear by using the phrase "in His own essence."

MK is also different than either natural or free knowledge in terms of its content. It is different than natural knowledge in that it comprehends all the possible situations in which creatures may find themselves and the decisions that they *would* make in those circumstances. Natural knowledge does include possibilities, but MK further limits these possibilities to those which are in harmony with the free wills of creatures. It is different than free knowledge in that it includes all possible

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comes out of that decision, there is no more openness to the future.

<sup>22</sup>Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, p. 168. In some literature, Molina's work is cited this way: Molina, *Concordia*, 4.52.9. This specifies the major part of the *Concordia* (4), the disputation number (52), and the section number (9). I will cite quotes from Molina using the page numbers from Freddoso's translation.

<sup>23</sup>Laing, "Molinism and Supercomprehension," pp. 290, 353. Thus is the phrase "outside of himself" qualified. See also Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 178.

sets of circumstances and the outcomes of them, whereas free knowledge includes the one set of circumstances that God has decreed for the actual world. By the “time” God’s free knowledge has been “settled,” there are no more open possibilities, but God knows all circumstances and all the decisions that free creatures will make in them.

The first part of Molina’s definition says, “in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice.” In the literature this is called the doctrine of supercomprehension, that is, that God knows each creature so well that he knows what free choice the creature would make in any possible circumstance.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean, according to Molina, that the decision of the creature is or becomes fixed in some fatalistic way. God simply knows what the creature will do because his intellect so infinitely surpasses that of the creature. There are not any conditions that determine or limit the creature’s free choice; he is free to choose whatever way he wants, yet God knows what way he will choose.

The next part of the definition mentions the creaturely faculty of free choice and the innate freedom of the creature. This is an important part of the definition. Molina came to the task of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom with the presupposition that men are free in the libertarian sense of that word. This presupposition originates in his commitment to the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly that adherence to the doctrine of man’s freedom is required by the Council of Trent.<sup>25</sup> The doctrine of MK “builds in” this freedom as part of God’s knowledge so that the two can be reconciled easily with one another.

The definition also mentions the infinite number of possible situations that God can comprehend. This is no problem for God, as he is omniscient.

Finally, the definition says that God knows the decision of each creaturely free will, “even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.” This undercuts the potential argument against MK that it only offers a hypothetical freedom that is never actual. That is, if God foreknows something, it seems necessary for it to come to pass. Notwithstanding, Molina says, the creature is free to do whatever it wants, and God’s prior knowledge of that decision does not affect the creature’s true freedom as God saw it in his MK. We will have more to say on this later after we survey the arguments in favor of MK and some of its applications in the study of theology.

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<sup>24</sup>Laing, “Molinism and Supercomprehension,” pp. 289–319 describes this doctrine of supercomprehension.

<sup>25</sup>Council of Trent, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), p. 43. Canon 5 says, “If anyone says that after the sin of Adam man’s free will was lost or destroyed, or that it is a thing only in name, indeed a name without a reality, a fiction introduced into the Church by Satan, let him be anathema.” See also Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 169.

### Arguments for Middle Knowledge

There are two main lines of support for the doctrine of MK, the biblical and the philosophical. These will be examined in turn.

#### Biblical Support for Middle Knowledge

A number of Bible passages are used in support of MK. The classic passage claimed by supporters of MK is 1 Samuel 23:7–13. David asked the Lord to tell him the truth or falsity of the following twofold counterfactual, with the condition implied but not explicitly stated: “If I stay in Keilah, will Saul come down, and will the residents of Keilah hand me over?”<sup>26</sup> God replied that this counterfactual was indeed true on both counts. There were two options for David because of the two possible actions of the men of Keilah. If these men were placed in the threatening situation where Saul surrounded their city, they would freely hand over David. However, this situation does not in fact come to pass because David used God’s answer to remove himself from the region and thus not put the men of Keilah into those circumstances. David acted to avoid the bad outcome by nullifying the truth of the subjunctive in the protasis.

Similar dangerous situations occur in Matthew 2:13 and Acts 21:10–14. In Matthew, Joseph is told to flee from Bethlehem with Mary and Jesus. The implied counterfactual is “if you stay in Bethlehem, Herod will kill the child.” In Acts, the eventual fact was “if you go to Jerusalem, you will be captured by the Jews.” A counterfactual that corresponds to this situation would be “if you stay away from Jerusalem, you will avoid capture.”

Another very well known counterfactual passage is Matthew 11:20–24 (parallel Luke 10:13–15). The counterfactual of the passage is a past counterfactual. “If the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon...then they would have repented of their sin.”<sup>27</sup> Evidently, Jesus knows this hypothetical to be true, or he would not have said it as if it were true. Obviously they were not placed in such a situation since Jesus was incarnated far later in history; but the Bible gives us the plain impression that had circumstances been different, their response also would have been different.

Other counterfactual statements occur throughout Scripture. For instance, 1 Corinthians 2:8: “[The wisdom of God] which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Here, a past counterfactual is used. The counterfactual is “if the princes of this world had been placed into a situation where they were able to come to an

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<sup>26</sup>All Scripture citations are taken from the NASB, 1995 update.

<sup>27</sup>Middle knowledge supporters would add that the people in Tyre and Sidon would have *freely* repented of their sin. It will become clear later in the essay why this phrasing is problematic, and how such repentance would have happened.

understanding of God's wisdom, then they would have chosen to not crucify Christ." All of these examples support the idea that God knows the *woulds* of situations that never did in fact come to pass.<sup>28</sup>

### Philosophical Support for Middle Knowledge

The primary philosophical argument for MK can be called the pragmatic argument, namely, that it explains a number of theological problems so well that it could not be wrong. Craig offers this argument:

Does God, then, possess middle knowledge? It would be difficult to prove in any direct way that he does, for the biblical passages are not unequivocal. Nevertheless, the doctrine is so fruitful in illuminating divine prescience, providence, and predestination that it can be presumed unless there are insoluble objections to it.<sup>29</sup>

He continues by writing, "We have seen that the doctrine of divine middle knowledge, while having some biblical support, ought to be accepted mainly because of its great theological advantages."<sup>30</sup>

A second argument in support of MK could be called the common presupposition argument, about which Craig writes:

In fact, it is interesting how often ordinary Christian believers naturally assume that God has middle knowledge. For example, Christians regularly seem to presuppose divine middle knowledge when they pray for God's guidance. They assume that God knows which of two paths would be better for them to take.... Or again, Christians have sometimes espoused middle knowledge when they reflect on the issue of the salvation of infants.... The assumption, then, that God possesses such knowledge underlies, I think, the views of many ordinary Christians.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, MK must be true because it is almost universally accepted, even if many Christians do not consciously understand the implications of what they are saying.

A third philosophical argument is that God's infinite knowledge is so perfect that he must have MK of the free acts of his creatures. His perfections are "unlimited in every aspect."<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, Craig asserts that

providence and predestination presuppose middle knowledge. According to the doctrine of God's providence, God preordained and arranged all things to suit His purposes. But how could this be done for contingent

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<sup>28</sup>For more examples of counterfactuals and commentary, see Postiff, "How God Knows Counterfactuals," pp. 16–17.

<sup>29</sup>Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 137. The next section of this essay, *Applications of Middle Knowledge*, grows out of this assertion.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 137–38.

<sup>32</sup>Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 183.

causes apart from middle knowledge of what they would do under certain circumstances?<sup>33</sup>

The obvious answer to his rhetorical question is that God *must* have MK to explain these other doctrines (at least from his perspective).<sup>34</sup>

### Applications of Middle Knowledge<sup>35</sup>

One of the alleged advantages of MK is that it explains many difficult doctrines. It is so effective in this way that some of Molina's opponents complained that his doctrine destroyed biblical mysteries. For example:

1. Adam's sin is imputed to all men because God foreknew that each person would have committed the same sin in those circumstances.<sup>36</sup>
2. Infants are saved based on whether they would have had faith in Christ had they lived.<sup>37</sup>
3. God judges unevangelized adults based on the decision the person would have made had they heard the gospel.<sup>38</sup>
4. God uses MK to guide Christians as they pray, "which way would be the best for me to go?"<sup>39</sup>
5. God foreknows all things, even the free choices of his creatures, based first on MK and second on his decree that used MK to decide what world to instantiate.
6. God predestines certain individuals to salvation by either (a) giving prevenient grace to all and then, based on MK, knowing how each individual would respond;<sup>40</sup> or (b) deciding who to save and then, using MK, determining which graces would be sufficient to elicit a saving response from that individual.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>There is a seeming circularity among these arguments. Among the theological advantages mentioned earlier is the fact that MK offers a handy explanation of providence and predestination. MK is supposed to explain these doctrines, but here Craig says that MK is presupposed by them. Perhaps the circularity can be eliminated by saying that the doctrines entail each other as part of a coherent system.

<sup>35</sup>For more detailed explanations of these applications, see Postiff, "How God Knows Counterfactuals," pp. 18–26.

<sup>36</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), p. 287. See also p. 436.

<sup>37</sup>Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 138.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>40</sup>Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" p. 157.

<sup>41</sup>Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, pp. 227–29. Note that Arminius held to predestination based on MK (not simple foreknowledge):

7. God inspired the Bible by using his MK to decree a world in which the authors of Scripture would write exactly what God wanted.<sup>42</sup>
8. God guaranteed the perseverance of the saints by creating the world in which each believer would freely choose to heed the warnings in the Bible and thus persevere.<sup>43</sup>
9. God is not immoral due to evil in the world because the free choices of creatures caused evil; God simply knew about these choices through MK. To create a world with sufficient good, God had to allow for evil and/or create free-willed creatures.<sup>44</sup>
10. MK allows a robust view of God's sovereignty alongside a realistic view of man's freedom, thus providing a middle ground between Arminianism and Calvinism.<sup>45</sup>

### Arguments Against Middle Knowledge

In this section, I will outline several objections to the doctrine of MK.<sup>46</sup> Such objections arose soon after Molina's publication of the *Concordia* in 1588. By 1594, the debate was so intense that Pope Clement VIII ordered a "Commission on Grace" which began nearly ten years of study of Molina's work (1597–1606).<sup>47</sup> Somewhat later,

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"That kind of God's knowledge which is called 'practical, 'of simple intelligence,' and 'natural or necessary,' is the cause of all things through the mode of prescribing and directing, to which is added the action of the will and power; (Psalm civ, 24;) although that 'middle' kind of knowledge must intervene in things which depend on the liberty of a created will" (James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, 3 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], 1:449). Other scholars agree. See Laing, "Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," p. 457, n. 6. Dekker concludes, "Arminius not only mentions the theory of middle knowledge, but he also has incorporated it in his theology. It appears in all crucial formulations of his doctrine of divine knowledge" (Eef Dekker, "Was Arminius a Molinist?" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 [Summer 1996]: 337–52).

<sup>42</sup>William Lane Craig, "Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God' (2 Peter 1:21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration," *Philosophia Christi* NS 1 (1999), par. 115, accessed 15 April 2006, available from <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/menmoved.html>. Internet.

<sup>43</sup>William Lane Craig, "Lest Anyone Should Fall': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991), par 43, accessed 15 April 2006, available from <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/lest.html>. Internet.

<sup>44</sup>See, for instance, Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 184. See also Laing, "Molinism and Supercomprehension," pp. 159–63.

<sup>45</sup>An extended treatment of this idea is offered by Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2010).

<sup>46</sup>Paul Helm (*The Providence of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], pp. 55–61) offers a helpful critique of middle knowledge. Charles Hodge also summarizes a number of objections to the doctrine in *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint of 1952 ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:398–400.

<sup>47</sup>Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, pp. 169–70 and Alfred J. Freddoso, preface to *On Divine Foreknowledge*, by Luis de Molina,

Reformed scholar Francis Turretin (1623–87) wrote a section against MK in his *Elenctic Theology*.<sup>48</sup> Several modern proponents of MK have dealt with these objections and their responses will be included at the appropriate points below.<sup>49</sup>

### Some “Possible” Worlds Not Possible

One problem with MK as formulated by Molina is that it states God’s natural knowledge is the knowledge of all possibilities, and his MK is his knowledge of what worlds, given creaturely freedom, can be made actual. But, as Frame asks, “What is the difference between these? Are there worlds that are genuinely possible, but which God cannot make actual?”<sup>50</sup> In other words, if a world cannot be made actual, is it possible in the first place? And if it is not really possible, does MK propose a nearly infinite number of useless facts that God “knows” with respect to that world and millions of other such worlds?<sup>51</sup>

Related to this objection is that MK treats some possibilities differently than others. The decisions of free creatures and the possibilities that those decisions raise are made a special case compared to other possibilities that God knows as part of his natural knowledge. Why this should be so is unclear, unless it simply grows out of the assumption that creatures are at some level independent of the Creator. Said another way, why is there a distinction between possibilities that are possible for God and possibilities that are only possible for his creatures?

### Middle Knowledge Not Entirely Prevolitional

There is another problem latent in the definition of MK, which states that God knows what each “faculty of free choice” would do with its freedom. Immediately, therefore, the definition presupposes that any creatures which do not have a certain type of free choice are not contemplated by God in his design of the universe. That is, God has already decided that only creatures with a libertarian faculty of free

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pp. vii–viii. For a detailed timeline of events surrounding this commission, see Laing, “Molinism and Supercomprehension,” pp. 354–58 (Appendix 1).

<sup>48</sup>Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:212–18.

<sup>49</sup>Craig deals with six objections to middle knowledge (*Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, pp. 190–98).

<sup>50</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p. 503.

<sup>51</sup>The view I will support at the end of this essay suggests that God knows many counterfactuals, that is, things that do not actually happen. It could be suggested that these constitute “useless” knowledge as well, though I will argue that such knowledge is simply a necessary “problem” for a being which has the perfections God does. My criticism of the MK view focuses on the uselessness of general knowledge or counterfactual knowledge that has to do with impossible worlds.

choice are among those that he wishes to create. This is an assumption that really needs to be proven. Furthermore, though its proponents claim MK comes before *any* act of the divine will, at least *one* decision has already been willed by God, namely to create only creatures which have a certain type of free will.

It might be objected at this point that God did not have to will anything because non-free creatures are simply not possible creatures in God's natural knowledge. After all, how can non-free creatures be responsible for sinful acts? But it seems far-fetched to say that it would be impossible for God to create creatures with some type of restricted free will. In fact, compatibilists teach this very idea, while not removing responsibility from the creature. There are other creatures with such restrictions (in the animal kingdom). In addition, we can certainly think of the possibility of creatures that are free but not in a libertarian sense; why could not God do the same? In sum, it is reasonable to assume that, if MK were true, then God must have freely chosen to create only human beings with libertarian freedom and thus MK is not fully prevolitional.

### **Middle Knowledge Proves Too Much from Bible Passages**

The basic problem in using the passages cited earlier is that the advocates of MK try to prove too much with these texts. Nowhere in them are the following propositions stated: (a) that a libertarian free will is a necessity or in fact exists; (b) that God knows counterfactuals in all other possible worlds; and (c) that there is only one really feasible (MK) explanation for the texts. In fact, all of those propositions are actually undercut by these texts.

Consider first the proposition that humans have a libertarian free will. The 1 Samuel passage about the men of Keilah certainly does not support this. They are faced with a choice to either give up David to Saul or face a siege by Saul's army in which they will be destroyed. The choice is obviously very constrained. The men of Keilah do not have a free choice in this situation. Only a remarkably principled leader would not turn over David to Saul in face of the high likelihood of dying otherwise.

The second proposition, that God knows counterfactuals in all other possible worlds, is not supported by the texts either. In fact, the 1 Corinthians 2:8 passage mentions the princes of *this world*, not some other possible world, or all other possible worlds. The way these situations are presented in the Bible relate to this present world and slight variations of it that might be envisioned. In no way do these situations suggest an infinity of other possibilities that God envisioned beforehand—possibilities that according to MK could never have been actualized because they would not have been agreeable to the free will of the creatures in that world.

The third proposition, that there is only one really feasible explanation of these texts, also goes far beyond what the texts actually say. Even though God knows at least some *woulds* (the texts indicate so) it

is a stretch to say this proves God has full-blown MK, as Craig admits.<sup>52</sup> In fact, it is easy to come up with other explanations. For example, God knew the nature or purpose of the men of Keilah so well as they existed at the time David made his request, that he knew how they would respond if faced with such a difficult situation.<sup>53</sup> The point of the “Woe” in Matthew 11:21, 23 is not to teach MK, but rather to show the hardness of heart of present unbelievers as compared with the people of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. God knew the character of the people of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom and the effect that such preaching and miracles by Christ would have had on them had it been available. Whether their repentance would have been true “godly sorrow” or just temporary “worldly sorrow” is not the main issue here because the Lord was not incarnate at the time of the existence of those civilizations and thus the “if part” of the counterfactual never happened. The main point is that their response would have been somehow positive in the hypothetical case, and thus would demonstrate their relative responsiveness compared to the hardened unbelievers in the Lord’s audience.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, the idea that God used MK in the logical moment prior to his decree is certainly not taught by these texts. They are not trying to teach a thorough formulation of God’s omniscience.

### **Problem Passages for the Middle Knowledge View**

Another difficulty with MK is that there are some very plain texts in the Scripture that teach against it. Isaiah 46:11, Romans 9:11, and Ephesians 1:11 all teach a very strong doctrine of God’s omnipotence, plan, and purpose. The Romans passage specifically tells us that God’s election of Jacob over Esau was according to his own purpose, and not the works or free choices of either of the children. Ephesians 1:11 asserts the same basic truth regarding the election of believers to salvation.

Taking the Ephesians passage as an example, proponents of MK would explain that God does indeed purpose and execute his will so that it comes to pass. He simply plans it through the use of his MK,

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<sup>52</sup>Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 137, n. 1.

<sup>53</sup>Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 1 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), p. 226.

<sup>54</sup>From the Calvinist perspective, this explanation leaves some loose ends that will be addressed later. Was the repentance genuine, salvific repentance? Or was it merely worldly remorse over sin and its consequences? If it was genuine repentance, it would require some form of help from God to achieve this repentance, because a simple alteration of the circumstances would not be enough to achieve genuine repentance. This in turn leads to the conclusion that the statement of the counterfactual does not fully spell out all the relevant “behind the scenes” information, particularly as to how God will change his behavior in the counterfactual situation. It is an error to ignore this information. From the libertarian perspective, no additional intervention by God would be necessary in either the true or temporary repentance case (we would suppose that God had already given prevenient grace to the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon).

and brings it to pass either by his general or particular concurrence. They can affirm that God does this by using his knowledge of the actions of free creatures in all possible circumstances and then selecting which set of circumstances to bring about. In reply, note that the Ephesians passage does not offer any room for the idea that God contemplated the free choices of individuals before formulating his purpose or plan. Certainly the Romans 9:11 passage does not allow for free creaturely choice as a basis for God's election.

### Argument Against Libertarian Freedom

Yet another argument against MK has to do with its reliance upon libertarian freedom. There are no limitations upon this freedom in Molina's view, so that the decisions made by the creature seem to be totally arbitrary.<sup>55</sup> In support of this notion, Molina asserts that "free decisions of the will exceed the nature of the subject willing them; that is to say, a subject's nature does not determine which decision the will shall make—otherwise, the decision would not be free and contingent."<sup>56</sup> But it is obvious, if from nothing more than experience, that the nature of a person does affect his decisions, so that his decisions are not free in the libertarian sense.

Consider first of all that when we say someone has a libertarian free will, we are not saying that he can do anything he wants. For instance, a physical limitation prevents him from choosing to jump to the moon if that desire is presented to his mind. Similarly, if there is a fork in the road, but one of the directions has a sign that says "Thru Traffic Only," then there is a constraint on his choice of which direction to travel. In terms of a counterfactual, "If David decides to leave Keilah, he will leave Keilah." That was in fact what occurred, but it could easily have been the case that the authorities in Keilah prevented him from implementing his decision.

If such physical, external limitations exist, why are not immaterial and spiritual factors also limiters to one's freedom? In fact, such *are* preventers to free choice. Consider Romans 8:7, "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so." Or Romans 3:11, "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God." The unbelieving but supposedly free agent, if faced with the general choice to please God or please himself, will ultimately choose to please himself. He cannot subject himself to the law of God. Because of sin, certain options may not present themselves to the agent's mind, or certain

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<sup>55</sup>Note that Molina is committed to the Catholic doctrine of man's freedom (Council of Trent, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, p. 43). This view has infiltrated the whole middle knowledge stream of thinking so that other types of freedom are ruled out immediately. But when approaching the problem of sovereignty and free will, the whole question boils down to what kind of freedom is possessed by humans. The Molinist answer to the problem is simply to assume libertarian freedom.

<sup>56</sup>Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 181.

options are so inimical to the sin nature that the agent would never choose them without help of God.

In sum, the Bible's view of man as a sinner by nature is a significant reason to reject libertarian free will and the MK system that rests on it.<sup>57</sup>

### Foreknowledge Is Incompatible with Libertarian Freedom

Another notable objection to MK is its relationship to God's knowledge of future events. Simply stated, if God knows that a future action will invariably occur, how can the agent making a choice to do that action be totally free to do so? In other words, God's foreknowledge limits freedom.<sup>58</sup> If the action will occur, the agent is in some sense constrained to make the decision that he does. Thus, the freedom offered by MK seems to be only hypothetical—the agent is somehow free in God's reckoning before the divine decree, but at the point of decision the agent really has no choice in the matter. The creature's freedom is significantly reduced.

As an example of this, Luke 24 tells us that the Lord *had* to suffer before entering his glory (v. 26). The Old Testament Scriptures *had* to be fulfilled (v. 44). It was *necessary* that Christ suffer and rise again the third day (v. 46). Freedom as it relates to the involvement of other people in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ seems to have been severely constrained.

Grudem puts the objection this way:

Craig's view does not sustain a view of freedom in the sense Arminians usually maintain: that no cause or set of causes made a person choose the way he or she did. On Craig's view, the surrounding circumstances and the person's own disposition *guarantee* that a certain choice will be made—otherwise, God could not know what the choice would be from his exhaustive knowledge of the person and the circumstances. But if God knows what the choice will be, and if that choice is guaranteed, then it could not be otherwise. Moreover, if both the person and the circumstances have been created by God, then ultimately the outcome has been determined by God. This sounds very close to freedom in a Calvinist sense, but it is certainly not the kind of freedom that most Arminians would accept.<sup>59</sup>

This problem is recognized by Craig when he writes:

Given that God has foreknown an event, His foreknowledge is, in the composed sense, incapable of being otherwise. But considered in itself apart from temporal considerations, it is, in the divided sense, able to be different. Similarly, given that an event is future, it is, in the composed

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<sup>57</sup>For an extended argument against libertarian freedom, see Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *FP* 20 (October 2003): 460–78.

<sup>58</sup>God's foreknowledge is a *preventer* to an agent's free decision.

<sup>59</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 349.

sense, incapable of not occurring. But apart from temporal considerations, it is, in the divided sense, able to not occur. Hence, it is difficult to see why, if a future event is in a certain sense contingent [the divided sense], God's foreknowledge is not in the same sense contingent. But Molina eschewed this conclusion because, as we have seen, he felt it undermined the certainty of God's foreknowledge.<sup>60</sup>

Craig's defense requires some additional explanation. When he says that God's foreknowledge, in the "composed sense," is incapable of being otherwise, he means that the combination of God's knowledge, MK, and decree together do not allow for the possibility of something else happening. Once God has decreed this particular world to come into existence, the future is closed. This composed sense, however, is irrelevant to the issues of contingency and freedom, Craig asserts.<sup>61</sup>

The relevant sense is the "divided sense," in which "we are as perfectly free in our decisions and actions as if God's foreknowledge did not exist."<sup>62</sup> In other words, Craig claims that the only way we are allowed to consider human freedom is to look back and consider how God saw it before the decree to instantiate the world. In a logical sense, before the decree of how things would actually be, God did not foreknow anything about it. In the absence of foreknowledge, we can consider creatures to be free and not constrained by God's foreknowledge. Once this sense is combined with his will to produce the "composed sense," it is only then that freedom is basically eliminated.

While actual freedom is limited in this composed sense, Craig avoids fatalism by explaining that if a free agent were to choose differently, then God's MK would have been different.<sup>63</sup> Thus, God's

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<sup>60</sup>Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, pp. 189–90. On p. 190 he writes, "Because God's knowledge thus depends on the creature's will and does not produce its effect without a determination of the divine will, it does not produce its effects necessarily." On p. 199 he continues, "While it is impossible in the composed sense, given God's foreknowledge, for anything to happen differently than it will, this sense is irrelevant to contingency and freedom. In the relevant, divided sense we are as perfectly free in our decisions and actions as if God's foreknowledge did not exist. Middle knowledge therefore supplies not only the basis for divine foreknowledge, but also the means of reconciling that foreknowledge with creaturely freedom and contingency."

<sup>61</sup>Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" p. 152.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Craig writes, "Therefore, the divine foreknowledge which exists is, indeed, incompatible with the event's not occurring, but it is perfectly compatible with the event's being *able* to not occur. For if that possibility were to be actualized, the divine foreknowledge would always have been different" (*Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 192). But earlier he says, "Hence it is within Peter's power to refrain from sin, but it is not within his power to affect God's foreknowledge, even though it is necessarily true that where [*sic*] he to refrain from sin God would always have foreknown differently" (p. 198). We will also see that according to Molinists, God has no power over his middle knowledge. But if Peter does not have power over it either, then it seems that it is totally outside the realm of anyone's control!

foreknowledge does not, Craig says, make the action happen invariably because God's will is based on his MK of the decision of the creature's will. He therefore avoids saying that foreknowledge of an event necessarily entails the occurrence of the event. Foreknowledge renders the event *certain*, but the event was not *necessary* because the creature could have been disposed to choose differently, thus making God's middle knowledge different than it was. For the MK advocate, it has to be explained this way to avoid fatalism.

The certainty/necessity distinction seems to help Craig's case somewhat.<sup>64</sup> But working against Craig's defense is the fact that our whole existence is circumscribed by this "composed sense." We have no access to the divided sense. Only God had access to it in eternity past. So, our own freedom seems to be unavailable to us!

Looking at the problem another way, true human freedom would limit God's foreknowledge. Craig almost admits this when he says that God's foreknowledge is in a sense (the divided sense) contingent. Molina did not want to admit such a contingency because it seemed to make God uncertain of the future. And indeed, true non-hypothetical human freedom precludes God's ability to plan and execute the future, for God would not know how the creature would choose until the choice was actually made.<sup>65</sup>

### The Grounding Objection

Another argument against MK has to do with the grounds of the truth of the counterfactuals allegedly known by God. That is to say, on

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<sup>64</sup>The distinction between certainty and necessity may initially seem like a nit-pick. However, both Arminians and Calvinists speak in such terms. Craig (*Only Wise God*, p. 73) points out that something being *necessary* is not precisely the same as it being *certain*. If something is *necessary*, it would seem to indicate a sort of fatalism which implies that the choices of free creatures are constrained and somehow not genuine. However, if something is *certain*, this allows that the something will certainly occur, but it does not constrain the creature's ability to choose another path. On the Calvinist side, see Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, pp. 635–39 in his discussion on soft determinism, where he distinguishes three senses of necessity and two kinds of constraint.

<sup>65</sup>Indeed, in the Molinist account, not even the creature knows what he would choose ahead of time, for neither the circumstances nor the nature of the creature are determinate in the choice. Of course, Molinists assert the doctrine of supercomprehension at this point, saying that "God just knows." It is not really clear how he knows such an indeterministic choice, but he knows. Turretin writes, "The middle knowledge can have no certainty because it is occupied about an uncertain and contingent object" (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:215). See also Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), p. 189; Helm, *The Providence of God*, p. 61; Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 778. David M. Ciochi argues a different way. If God knows Judas will betray Christ given circumstances C, there is no possible world in which Judas will *not* betray Christ given circumstances C. Thus libertarian free will is incompatible with middle knowledge ("Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *JETS* 37 [September 1994]: 406). Ciochi suggests that compatibilist free will is the only type of freedom that can work with middle knowledge (see below for more on that notion).

what basis are those counterfactuals true? Who or what makes them true? We cannot propose an answer involving the correspondence of the proposition to reality, for by definition a counterfactual is counter to reality. It is true even though it does not have any reality to which we may peg its truth.

If we suppose that God himself causes the truth of a counterfactual, this raises a problem, for God was not supposed to have any act of will before he knew the counterfactuals to be true. Their truth should be determined by the libertarianly free choice of the creature, lest the libertarian presupposition fail. Furthermore, true counterfactuals are supposed to be true regardless of which path God actually chose. So the truth of them does not seem to be able to be grounded in God.

On the other hand, if we suppose that the creature causes the truth of the counterfactual, this is problematic for at least a couple of reasons. First, grounding the truth of the counterfactual in the creature would seem to require belief in backward causation (the effect comes before the cause) in order to make the creature be the cause of a before-time effect on God's knowledge. This is a difficult belief to accept. Second, some allegedly true counterfactuals relate to creatures that are not in fact ever created. But if the truth-ground of the counterfactual is in the creature, and the creature is never created, it seems that the counterfactual cannot have a ground for its truth.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the worlds that were never to be do not seem to provide any basis for "truth" and so could not provide any "knowledge" to God. Turretin states it this way: "Things not true cannot be foreknown as true."<sup>67</sup>

Since both proposals (the ground in God or the ground in the creature) are ridden with problems, the ground of why the counterfactuals are true seems to be missing.<sup>68</sup>

Craig has written much on this subject to refute the grounding objection.<sup>69</sup> His basic argument is that grounding objectors have not been

<sup>66</sup>For the general ideas in this section, I am indebted to Flint, *Divine Providence*, pp. 123–25.

<sup>67</sup>Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:214.

<sup>68</sup>Craig defines the grounding objection thus: "It is the claim that there are no true counterfactuals concerning what creatures would freely do under certain specified circumstances—the propositions expressed by such counterfactual sentences are said either to have no truth value or to be uniformly false—, since there is nothing to make these counterfactuals true. Because they are contrary-to-fact conditionals and are supposed to be true logically prior to God's creative decree, there is no ground of the truth of such counterfactual propositions. Thus, they cannot be known by God" (William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection,'" *FP* 18 [July 2001]: 337–38). Craig's formulation of the grounding objection goes too far, however. The form of the grounding objection given above does not say that there is *no* truth to counterfactuals or that they are *all* false; it simply says that such truth cannot be convincingly grounded either in God or in man *if* the MK system is assumed. If we drop the libertarian and prevolitional requirements, then sufficient grounds for the truth of counterfactuals may well appear.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 337–52 and Craig, *Only Wise God*, pp. 139–45.

able to formulate a convincing case for the grounding objection, as well as the fact that it seems reasonable that counterfactuals are true from our perspective, even granting that the situations that give rise to the counterfactuals will never obtain. He offers the “liver and onions versus chocolate chip cookies” example in which most people will freely choose the cookies over the liver if offered the choice. It is certainly not far-fetched to think that this counterfactual has some truth to it! In reply to Craig, it seems the case for the grounding objection is convincing enough that it requires a cogent rejoinder from MK proponents. In the absence of a convincing case in either direction, the grounding objection remains a substantial hurdle to accepting MK as viable.

### **Middle Knowledge Entails a Limitation on God’s Omnipotence**

To consider yet another objection to MK, think for a moment about open theism. In that system of thought, God is said to be omniscient, that is, he knows everything, but there are certain things that are not objects of knowledge. The classical view of omniscience would say this is a subtraction from God’s omniscience. But open view simply claims that those things “subtracted” were never and could never be objects of knowledge in the first place. No being, including God, could know them.

The doctrine of MK is definitely different than the open view. For one thing, MK proponents teach that God uses his MK to formulate his decree, and once that decree is formulated, there is no openness to the future. Further, the decisions of free agents are definitely included in God’s MK, based as they are on God’s supercomprehension of the finite free will. However, Molinism is similar to open theism in at least one respect: while open theism removes some things from the set of all things God could know, so Molinism removes the decisions of free creatures from the realm of God’s power.<sup>70</sup> God simply knows about those free decisions but can do nothing about that knowledge.

One might think that this limitation on God’s power is only temporary, during the early (logical) moments of his deliberations about the creation of the world. That is, God had no power over what his MK tells him, but that in actually making the creative decision to instantiate one of the possible worlds, he regains control over everything and can influence the free will in such a way as to make any decision that God desires, since God can put that agent in whatever

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<sup>70</sup>Craig writes, “But we have seen that it is not within God’s power to determine what decisions creatures would freely take under various circumstances” (*Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 200). A variant of Molinism which says that God does have power over these counterfactuals is defended by Jonathan Kvanvig (“On Behalf of Maverick Molinism,” *FP* 19 [July 2002]: 348–57). This view is claimed to be incoherent, however, by Flint (*Divine Providence*, pp. 65–70 and idem, “The Multiple Muddles of Maverick Molinism,” *FP* 20 [January 2003]: 91–101).

circumstances he desires. However, this is not the case. In fact, God has *no* power over the decisions of free creatures. According to Molina, and as suggested by Craig in the area of salvation, this works out in that “there are some possible persons who would not freely receive Christ under any circumstances.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, God could not construct any set of circumstances to bring those possible persons to Christ. This is plainly a denial of God’s omnipotence and makes God omnipotent over everything except human beings.<sup>72</sup>

### God Does Not Have Middle Knowledge of Himself

To illustrate a final problem with the doctrine of MK, consider the counterfactual in Jeremiah 26:3. It specifies the reaction of God conditioned on the response of the people. “If they turn...then I will not bring the calamity.” This is a special kind of counterfactual which suggests that God has knowledge of counterfactuals involving himself. There is a question as to whether God has counterfactual middle knowledge about himself, but he does at least seem to have counterfactual knowledge that involves himself. Many other passages are of this divinely self-referential type. These passages tell us that God knows how he himself would decide in response to some contingency.

Craig understands Molina to teach that God does know such conditionals about himself, though these are not part of his MK, but rather are part of his free knowledge. This is because MK is knowledge of counterfactuals *before* any decision of the divine will. But such divine self-referential counterfactuals come logically *after* God decides how he will order the affairs of the world in response to his MK of creaturely decisions, so therefore it is not “middle” knowledge.<sup>73</sup>

Herein lies a problem. It seems that God cannot have MK of his own actions, although he is himself a free being. This difficulty is admitted by advocates of the view, since “Molina believes that if God had MK of His own actions, that is to say, if God knew what He would do under any circumstances prior to the determination of His own will, then God would not be free to will whatever He wished under those circumstances.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, God has MK of his creatures to preserve the freedom of his creatures, but he does not have MK of himself, for this would eliminate his own freedom. This seemingly contradictory idea arises from the nature of God’s supercomprehension

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<sup>71</sup>Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 147. He explains, “In other words, some people, no matter how much the Spirit of God worked on their hearts, no matter how favorable their upbringing, no matter how many times or ways they heard the gospel, would still refuse to bow the knee and give their lives to Christ.... I believe that it probably is in fact true.... Hence, it is possible that God is not, after all, able to create a world in which all persons freely receive Christ.”

<sup>72</sup>See the fifth objection in Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:215. Raymond also objects in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 190.

<sup>73</sup>See Craig, *Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, p. 182.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 180.

of his creatures, which supercomprehension he cannot have of himself because he simply knows himself and does not have a “higher” knowledge of his will than he himself does. That is, God knows the creaturely will infinitely better than the creature knows himself; but God’s knowledge of his own will does not infinitely exceed his own knowledge of himself.

Molina and Craig solve this problem by saying that God does know what he would do in other circumstances, but this knowledge is located in his free knowledge, not in MK (of himself).<sup>75</sup>

We could summarize the MK view by saying that God does not have middle knowledge of himself, but he does have counterfactual (non-middle) knowledge involving himself. But this raises two problems. The first problem is that humans have a sort of counterfactual knowledge of themselves regarding circumstances other than those that obtain, based on their present circumstances and preferences. We know counterfactuals about ourselves before we make a decision on a particular issue. Does not God know about his own preferences logically before he makes a decision? How can his counterfactual knowledge be limited to his free knowledge?

The second problem is the seeming incongruity of God knowing some counterfactuals (about free creatures) through MK before his decree, while knowing other counterfactuals (about himself) through free knowledge after his decree. It is at this point that a real Achilles heel of MK appears. The weakness is that all counterfactuals about free creatures also involve God. The two types of counterfactuals (creaturely and divine) are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. Humans do not make decisions in a vacuum, apart from any influence of God. When someone decides to repent of his sins and believe in Christ, God is also active in that person’s life. If it is true that God cannot have MK of himself and that a person’s choices also involve God, this suggests that the counterfactuals God allegedly knows in his MK actually belong together with the counterfactuals he knows about himself in his free knowledge. The two categories thus merge into one and middle knowledge disappears. The solution offered in this essay is essentially to move all counterfactuals to God’s free knowledge; this eliminates the two-tiered problem MK faces with God’s knowledge of counterfactuals involving himself.<sup>76</sup>

### **How Does God Know Counterfactuals?**

One final objection to the doctrine of MK is not so much an objection to the doctrine itself as it is a shortcoming of the doctrine with respect to the question posed in this essay. And that shortcoming is this: precisely how does MK explain how God knows the

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>76</sup>Travis J. Campbell offers five objections to MK, not all of which are covered here (“Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique,” *WTJ* 68 [Spring 2006]: 15–21).

counterfactuals that he knows?

MK does explain the logical order of God's three types of knowledge, and it does explain how God uses the middle type to formulate his decree. MK does delve more deeply into the nature of divine knowledge than the innate foreknowledge view.<sup>77</sup> And the doctrine of supercomprehension explains that God has middle knowledge because he inherently has "complete ideas of possible creatures—ideas which encompass everything about the creatures they represent, including the wills of those creatures."<sup>78</sup> But as for the question of how he knows the counterfactuals, the answer seems to be that he "just knows" with no further explanation. Molina's definition says "in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice."<sup>79</sup> Given libertarian freedom, in which the creature has the power of contrary choice in any situation, such an answer seems necessary. Since the outcome of the free choice could hypothetically go in any direction, how could God know it apart from such intuition? Suarez took a different tack, namely that since counterfactuals have a truth-value, the omniscient God must know their truth value.<sup>80</sup> In either case (Molina or Suarez), God's knowledge of counterfactuals amounts to simple intuition—he intuitively just knows the free choices of creatures given any possible set of circumstances. Such a view offers little in the way of a deeper explanation for the "how" question.<sup>81</sup>

### Summary

This section provided an introduction to MK and reviewed some of its supporting arguments and theological applications. It then demonstrated that the doctrine of MK as formulated by Molina has many insurmountable objections. MK also falls short of giving a real substantive explanation to the "how" question posed in this article. Some of these flaws have given rise to a variation of the doctrine of MK that is held by some moderate Calvinists. This variation of MK will be the subject of the next section.

### THE CALVINISTIC MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE EXPLANATION

Some Calvinists have proposed an improvement on MK that eliminates libertarian freedom in favor of compatibilist freedom. Such

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<sup>77</sup>Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 127.

<sup>78</sup>Laing, *Molinism and Supercomprehension*, p. 353.

<sup>79</sup>Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, p. 168.

<sup>80</sup>Robert Cook, "God, Middle Knowledge and Alternative Worlds," *EQ* 62 (October 1990): 295.

<sup>81</sup>Hasker points out this unsatisfactory conclusion in his review of *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, by William Lane Craig, in *FP* 6 (April 1989): 223–26.

freedom is also known as voluntary freedom, freedom of spontaneity, or freedom of inclination. In a compatibilist view, God can know creaturely choices because he knows the creature's will, desires, circumstances, indeed everything that relates to the choice the creature faces because this is how God (at least hypothetically) plans to arrange things. Since God knows all of this, he can know with certainty how the creature will respond in any possible circumstance. God's knowledge of these factors is the alleged solution to the MK grounding objection, and thus Calvinistic MK overcomes the problem for MK caused by libertarian freedom.

The aim of this section is to explain the Calvinist version of MK and to determine if it proves helpful in explaining how God knows counterfactuals.

### **Definition of Calvinist Middle Knowledge and Its Proponents**

There are several proponents of the CMK view in contemporary literature. They include Bruce Ware, Terrance Tiessen, John Frame, and John Feinberg, though the latter two have not embraced the view like Ware and Tiessen have. Ware says that God utilizes a Calvinist version of middle knowledge which he calls

“compatibilist middle knowledge,” knowledge of what compatibilistically free creatures *would* do, which is middle between God's knowledge of merely what *could* be and his knowledge of specifically what *will* be. Both Terrance Tiessen and John Frame have, in recent years, urged this concept, even if not with the same terminology.<sup>82</sup>

With this definition, it is clear that CMK shares with MK the logical three-fold division of God's knowledge. It drops libertarian freedom in favor of compatibilist freedom. Tiessen also defends the Calvinistic version of middle knowledge.<sup>83</sup> He makes clear that CMK also shares with MK the prevolitional element when he writes:

God's knowledge of what particular kinds of creatures would do in particular possible circumstances is not dependent on God's decree.... Thus, we do best to distinguish this as a distinct logical moment in God's knowing which is still prior to his deciding upon the history of the world.<sup>84</sup>

Ware's inclusion of Frame is somewhat dubious. Frame agrees that

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<sup>82</sup>Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>83</sup>Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer*, pp. 289–362 and idem, “Why Calvinists Should Believe in Divine Middle Knowledge, Although They Reject Molinism,” *WTJ* 69 (Fall 2007): 345–66. However, see his later retraction (which I will discuss below) in Paul Helm and Terrance L. Tiessen, “Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge? A Conversation,” *WTJ* 71 (Fall 2009): 437–54.

<sup>84</sup>Tiessen, “Why Calvinists Should Believe in Divine Middle Knowledge,” p. 366.

God has knowledge of hypothetical matters, but he rejects the “radical libertarianism” of Molina.<sup>85</sup> Broadly speaking, Frame writes as a critic of middle knowledge and does not seem to label his view as a “variant” of the middle knowledge view. He simply says God knows hypotheticals, and does so as part of his natural or necessary knowledge.<sup>86</sup> He clearly distances himself from Molina when he writes:

God does take human nature into account when he formulates his eternal plan for us. But that is only one perspective! The other perspective is that God’s knowledge of our nature is itself dependent upon his plan to make us in a particular way. God’s will is based on his knowledge, and his knowledge is based on his will.<sup>87</sup>

Frame does not allow for God’s knowledge to be dependent upon creatures in a sense apart from his will.

Another theologian that might be included in the list of CMK supporters is John Feinberg. In one source, he agrees that God has middle knowledge.<sup>88</sup> But in another he writes:

Moreover, I don’t believe God has middle knowledge, if middle knowledge includes knowledge of what humans would freely do in the libertarian sense. On the other hand, if one holds some form of determinism as I do, there is no reason to deny that God has middle knowledge of what humans would do (compatibilistically) freely.... So, while I doubt that an indeterminist could consistently hold that God has middle knowledge, I see no reason for a determinist to deny this.<sup>89</sup>

The remainder of this section will focus on Ware and Tiessen as the clearest proponents of the CMK view.

### **Differences Between Calvinistic Middle Knowledge and Stock Middle Knowledge**

CMK is “middle” in that it is between natural and free knowledge, but is it so in the same sense as Molina defined? There are at least two reasons why we should conclude that it is not the same.

First, CMK specifically rules out libertarian freedom as impossible since God cannot know which way a libertarian free choice might go.<sup>90</sup> This is to say that the CMK teaches that God does know counterfactuals, but not counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, because creatures are not libertarianly free.

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<sup>85</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 151.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>88</sup>John S. Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 34.

<sup>89</sup>Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, p. 752.

<sup>90</sup>Ware, *God’s Greater Glory*, p. 27.

Second, the Calvinistic version of middle knowledge is different from Molinism in that it presumes that given a set of conditions, the agent's behavior can be determined with certainty. Pure Molinism does not allow the conditions to so constrain the agent.<sup>91</sup> Remember that it is God's supercomprehension of the agent's will, not his understanding of the conditions, that allows God to know how the agent would respond. Ware explains:

But if we really do make our choices for prevailing reasons, if the conditions (both internal and external) surrounding a particular choice present to us the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for making just the choices we do...if this is so, then it follows that God can know what choices *would be made* by knowing just exactly the set of conditions...that gives rise to particular choices and actions. So, he can envision an agent in one situation, and knowing all the factors true in that situation can know from these factors what choice the agent *would make here*, and he can envision a slightly different situation, and again, in knowing all the factors true in that situation he can know what the agent *would do*, instead, *there*.<sup>92</sup>

Based on these differences, it should be evident that the Calvinistic version of middle knowledge is not really middle knowledge as Molina formulated it because it does not allow for libertarian human freedom. Rather, it emphasizes that God knows counterfactuals within a soft determinist or compatibilist framework. Frame makes this point when he writes:

If we abandon libertarianism, we abandon the traditional meaning of middle knowledge, and then, as I said earlier, there is no reason to distinguish God's knowledge of contingencies from his necessary knowledge of himself.<sup>93</sup>

### **Arguments Against Calvinistic Middle Knowledge**

CMK retains the important prevolitional element of MK even while it discards libertarian freedom. But can Calvinists really salvage such a middle knowledge? Many theologians do not believe so.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>See the earlier discussion of certainty versus necessity in n. 64.

<sup>92</sup>Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>93</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 151.

<sup>94</sup>Several authors are dogmatic that CMK is not viable. See Laing, "Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge"; Helm in Helm and Tiessen, "Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge?"; David Werther, "Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), accessed 9 February 2010, available from <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000122/article.pdf>, Internet; Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

### Compatibilist Freedom Makes a Third Type of Knowledge Infeasible

The first objection to CMK is that compatibilist freedom disallows a third, “middle” type of knowledge. CMK proponents paint the picture that God knows the infinite number of possible circumstances in which an agent might find himself. In each set of circumstances, the agent has choices about the course of action to take. These are what the agent *could* do and are part of God’s innate, natural knowledge, which includes the knowledge of all possibilities. Further, God knows by his middle knowledge which of those choices the agent will actually choose. This final choice is what the agent *would* do. So if agent A is in circumstances C, he could choose option 1, option 2, or option 3. God knows this much by his natural knowledge. But God also allegedly knows, by his middle knowledge, that agent A being in circumstances C will mean that in the end, A chooses option 2. It is this knowledge that God uses in constructing his decree.

Helm points out that CMK relies heavily on this “could vs. would” distinction.<sup>95</sup> But the distinction is meaningless in compatibilist freedom—and so CMK has a severe internal inconsistency. The inconsistency is just this: if God knows the possible circumstances in which the agent finds himself, then he should know perfectly the exact choice the agent will make in that circumstance. He should not have to “figure out” which choice of the multiple choices the agent might make. The very definition of compatibilist freedom includes that God completely knows the circumstances (external and internal, including inmost desires and all) that affect the creature’s decision. Once these factors are “fixed” then the final choice is known. In other words, if God knows agent A and circumstances C, then he knows everything that is necessary to know that A will choose option 2. There are no such options as 1 and 3. The number of options in the “could” set is reduced to only a single option because of compatibilistic freedom. Thus, the *coulds* equal the *woulds* in every possible scenario, and there seems to be no difference between CMK and God’s knowledge of all possibilities.<sup>96</sup>

This effectively denies any place for “possibilities.” There may be such a thing as a “possibility” from our perspective, but from God’s perspective, it seems reasonable to deny there is such a thing as pure possibility. Otherwise, God would be a hostage to fortune.<sup>97</sup> Pure

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<sup>95</sup>Helm and Tiessen, “Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge?” p. 441.

<sup>96</sup>Werther, “Calvinism and Middle Knowledge,” takes a different tack. His basic argument is that the fatalistic sort of necessity of Calvinism weighs against any kind of contingent knowledge in God, and thus God’s knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom must be entirely natural or entirely free.

<sup>97</sup>Dabney concurs: “Has this distinction of contingent effects any place at all, in God’s mind? Is it not a distinction relevant only to our ignorance? An effect is, in some cases, to us contingent; because our partial blindness prevents our foreseeing precisely

chance, whether it supposedly arises from randomness, the creature's freedom, or God's ignorance cannot viably co-exist with a high view of God's sovereignty. It does not seem right to say that something just "could" or "would" happen. Nothing "could" or "would" happen unless it was "willed" by God.

Among those who are critics of CMK, there is some debate as to where God's knowledge of counterfactuals should be placed, whether in his natural knowledge or his free knowledge. But the critics agree that the middle knowledge of CMK reduces to either of the other two types of knowledge and is not a third, "middle" category. Laing proposes that counterfactual knowledge should be placed in God's free knowledge:

Thus, although we may be sympathetic to the theological concerns of those who attempt to combine middle knowledge with moderate Calvinism, we must reject it as an ultimately untenable position. The soft determinist may claim that God possesses knowledge of counterfactuals of compatibilist freedom, but she cannot claim that such knowledge is prevolitional; it must be part of God's free knowledge.<sup>98</sup>

Frame attempts to place the knowledge of counterfactuals in God's natural or necessary knowledge.<sup>99</sup> He suggests that such knowledge of the creature *is* prevolitional, because it is a part of God's knowledge of all possibilities. But it should be noted that creatures are not a part of God's necessary knowledge, for creatures themselves are not necessary. God could or could not have created them. In any case,

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what are the present concurring causes, promoting, or preventing, or whether the things supposed to be, are real causes, under the given circumstances.... There is, therefore, to God, no such thing, in strictness of speech, as a contingent effect.... To God, therefore, whose knowledge is perfect, there is literally no such thing as a contingent effect" (Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 158).

<sup>98</sup>Laing, "Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," p. 467. This agrees with his earlier dissertation, in which he writes, "Tiessen characterizes his own position as a middle knowledge Calvinist position. It is doubtful that any such position exists, for by definition, the content of middle knowledge must be prevolitional; that is, it must be true independent of God's will" ("Molinism and Supercomprehension: Grounding Counterfactual Truth," p. 347). Laing believes in libertarian freedom and denies the validity of the grounding objection. He bases this on the notion that free creatures exist in the mind of God as ideas, and God supercomprehends their wills.

<sup>99</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 503. What I am saying here is an inference from what he has written. What pointed me in this direction was Frame's statement about God's knowledge of possibilities: "God knows what creatures and what creaturely actions are possible, simply because he knows himself. He knows what he can bring about. God knows these possibilities simply by knowing his own nature. And his knowledge of his own nature is necessary." This is the opposite of what Laing said, that the knowledge of possibilities must be a component of God's *free knowledge* because it is post-volitional. Frame argues the other way—that God knows simply because he knows as part of his nature. I conclude therefore that Frame does not ground counterfactuals in the creature or in God's will, but in God himself, in his nature and natural knowledge.

Frame agrees that middle knowledge is not a third separate type of knowledge.

### **The Grounding Objection Makes CMK Infeasible**

A second challenge to CMK is that it does not properly handle the grounding objection. The grounding objection states that there is no way to ground the truth of counterfactuals in MK. We have shown from the Scriptures that God does know at least some counterfactuals, so a general statement of the grounding objection is not bulletproof.<sup>100</sup> When examining the claims of CMK, we can ask upon what, in that system, is the truth of such counterfactuals grounded. Such a line of questioning will bring to light another serious inconsistency of Calvinist middle knowledge.<sup>101</sup>

Suppose we have a proposition of the form “if agent A were in circumstances C, he would compatibilistically freely choose to do X.” It would seem that the truth of this is grounded in God’s will, because A, C, and X are all contemplated as existing, which would require God’s willing them to exist. Furthermore, the very notion that A has some level of freedom to choose X in circumstances C assumes that God has willed the agent to have such freedom, that is, that he has already willed agent A to have a certain kind of freedom. But if the truth of the counterfactual is grounded in God’s will, or in God’s will of how the creature would be, then this type of middle knowledge is not pre-volitional, that is, before any decree of God. But the pre-volitional idea is a key pillar to middle knowledge—if it is removed, the knowledge is not in the middle of anything. If there is no pre-volitional middle knowledge, such knowledge is actually posterior to the divine will to create and is thus part of God’s free knowledge. This is basically just compatibilism.

On the other hand, if the truth of the example proposition is not grounded in God’s will, then it must be grounded in the creature somehow.<sup>102</sup> Besides the obviously problematic nature of grounding

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<sup>100</sup>If Scripture asserts that God knows the counterfactuals, then they must be true, regardless of anyone’s appeal to a grounding objection. This may seem to be contradictory to my earlier acceptance of the grounding objection as having validity as an argument against middle knowledge. To resolve the apparent contradiction, note that the grounding objection applies specifically to Molinism because of its claim that counterfactual truths exist before any action of the divine will. But if we accept that an action of the divine will precedes the counterfactuals, then it is easy to ground them: their ground is in God’s will. Without that, it seems counterfactual truths must be grounded in the creature which does not yet exist.

<sup>101</sup>The inconsistency is pointed out by Laing, “Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge,” pp. 462–63. He says that most compatibilists do accept the grounding objection, yet when they embrace a compatibilist version of middle knowledge, they do not realize that the grounding objection applies equally well to their version of middle knowledge.

<sup>102</sup>Laing admits the possibility that one could say the truth of counterfactuals need not be grounded at all, but that would not solve the compatibilist’s problem that no matter where he grounds counterfactual truth, he is not left with either his

any truth outside of God, this view is basically the same view as propounded by Arminian middle knowledge advocates. That is to say, if the truth of the counterfactual is generally grounded in the creature, it seems that it would have to be specifically grounded in the creature's own decision-making capacity. This is what the Calvinist was trying to avoid in the first place! Laing ties together the argument in this way:

The proponent of a Calvinist-Middle Knowledge position seems to be caught between the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if she claims that the truth of counterfactuals of compatibilist freedom is grounded in the will of God or in the way God created the creaturely will, then she has denied the prevolitional character of divine knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom and therefore, her position is not in the middle of anything. On the other hand, if she claims that the truth of counterfactuals of compatibilist freedom are grounded in the character of the creature as he pre-exists in the mind of God, or that the truth of counterfactuals of compatibilistic freedom do not need to be grounded, then her view of freedom is virtually indistinguishable from libertarian freedom.<sup>103</sup>

### CMK Relinquishes Its Calvinist Distinctive

A third argument against CMK is that the Calvinism of CMK loses many of its distinctive elements in favor of Arminianism. The whole idea of middle knowledge was to explain God's knowledge of libertarian free will. Arminius adopted the view of MK to explain God's knowledge of creaturely liberty. MK grounds God's decree, in some sense, in the creature rather than in the Creator, another very non-Calvinistic idea. CMK is far from a "middle ground." It leans heavily toward the Arminian side of the spectrum while still claiming to be Calvinistic.<sup>104</sup>

In the end, the point of all of these objections is to say that if a Calvinist wants to hold to something he calls middle knowledge, he must significantly change the definition of it to remove libertarian freedom and all of the problems associated therewith, and he must take care to avoid the pitfalls of improper grounding of counterfactual truth, lest he fall back into pure Molinism. Furthermore, he must admit that the middle knowledge is only middle in the sense that it has to do with counterfactuals, not in the sense that it stands between two other types of God's knowledge. Then the question is, why call it middle knowledge at all? And finally, if it logically moves toward

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Calvinism or a knowledge that is in the middle of anything ("Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," p. 467).

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>I am indebted to Travis Campbell for this argument. He writes, "But consistent Calvinists cannot embrace the *scientia media* either, if for no other reason than that too many Reformed distinctives would be lost in this scheme" ("Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique," p. 14). For a similar objection, see David Basinger, "The New Calvinism: A Sheep in Wolves' Clothing," *SJT* 39 (1986): 483–99.

Arminianism, it is questionable if it can really be called Calvinistic either.

### How Does God Know Counterfactuals?

If we overlook for a moment the problems just mentioned, the strength of the CMK proposal is that it does a better job of explaining how God knows counterfactuals than does the stock MK view. As we saw at the end of the MK section, MK explains God's knowledge of counterfactuals by saying that he "just knows." CMK is different, because it does not have to contend with libertarian freedom and the inherent uncertainty about the choices such free agents would make. As a result, CMK can propose to ground God's knowledge of counterfactuals in his knowledge of compatibilistically free creatures in terms of their circumstances, desires, character, etc. It does not have to appeal to "supercomprehension." In other words, God knows counterfactuals because he knows the creatures and circumstances, and thus all of the factors that are necessary to know how the creature will decide.

### Recent Abandonment of the Calvinistic Middle Knowledge View

The problems mentioned above, among others, have brought CMK to a breaking point. In a recently published interchange between Helm and Tiessen, Helm presents his case against Tiessen's CMK and Tiessen admits that he no longer holds to CMK.<sup>105</sup>

Helm points out one of the objections we raised above, namely that, on a compatibilist view of freedom, there is no difference between the "coulds" of natural knowledge and the "woulds" of middle knowledge.<sup>106</sup> His second objection is that Tiessen seems to consider the circumstances of an agent in two segments—first, circumstances unaffected by God, and second, circumstances altered by some divine intervention. The need for such a distinction is unclear and is not explained by Tiessen.<sup>107</sup> Third, Tiessen uses clearly temporal language when speaking of God's analysis and deliberation of things before his decree. This jeopardizes God's omniscience by making God "learn" through a discursive process.<sup>108</sup> And so, Helm concludes, the proposed benefits of CMK to the question of divine sovereignty and human responsibility are at best illusory.<sup>109</sup>

Tiessen concedes Helm's "could = would" argument:

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<sup>105</sup>Helm and Tiessen, "Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge?" pp. 437–54.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., pp. 441–43.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 444. I do not believe that temporalism is necessary to Tiessen's case for counterfactual knowledge *per se*.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 447.

Reflection on Professor Helm's recent comments has finally brought me to the conclusion that he is correct on this point. God's knowledge of counterfactuals is not different from his knowledge of possibilities; it is therefore part of his necessary knowledge.<sup>110</sup>

Tiessen indicates that he was in error because he likened God's knowledge too closely to human knowledge, and he was enamored with the usefulness of MK to God's planning of the decree. He realizes now that

the sole rationale for positing middle knowledge is to give room for libertarian creaturely freedom.... I now believe that rejection of the Molinist construction because of its faulty understanding of freedom also entails rejection of the concept of divine middle knowledge.<sup>111</sup>

Tiessen is willing to rename his proposal to "hypothetical knowledge Calvinism" or something similar, but he still sees great utility to counterfactual knowledge in the formulation of the decree. He is not willing to abandon his temporal view of God, nor does he feel the need to modify his model of providence simply because of the change of name and movement of counterfactual knowledge "back" to the natural knowledge category.<sup>112</sup>

Such a formerly staunch proponent of the mediating view of CMK thus has admitted that the case for CMK is very weak. To satisfy the Calvinist, a more consistent view is needed, one that does not rely on Molinism.

### Summary

This section of the essay showed that some Calvinist theologians have proposed an alternative definition of middle knowledge that is based on compatibilist freedom. The Calvinistic variation is similar in that it suggests that God knows what would happen in circumstances other than those that prevail. But this knowledge does not share the libertarian character of pure Molinism. It proposes that God knows counterfactuals on the basis of his knowing the character and conditions that lead to the creature's choices.

As promising as CMK sounds initially, it has some serious problems. It is not really middle knowledge. And though it is somewhat more insightful as to our question of how God knows counterfactuals, its internal inconsistencies have even led such a strong advocate as Tiessen to abandon it just within the last year. The next section will offer a view that has fewer problems and is more consistent with the relevant biblical texts.

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., pp. 450, 452, 453.

## THE COMPATIBILIST COUNTERFACTUAL EXPLANATION

The previous sections demonstrated serious shortcomings in the MK and CMK explanations of how God knows counterfactuals. The aim of this section is to explain an alternate view that addresses the major problems of the two popular competing views and to show just how God knows counterfactuals. I have elected to call this view the compatibilist counterfactual explanation (hereafter abbreviated CC). This name distinguishes the view from the earlier views, clarifies that God does indeed know counterfactuals, states the kind of human freedom that it entails, and shows the basis on which God can know counterfactuals. The CC explanation emphasizes God's decree as an essential element to his knowledge of counterfactuals. I have not found a better name in the literature, and this seems more descriptive than the "Augustinian-Calvinist" name for the similar view explained by Paul Helm.<sup>113</sup> The approach of this section is to divide the case for the CC explanation into component assertions that are explained in turn.

### God Has Two Types of Knowledge

There is an eternal distinction between the creator and the creation. God is not his creation. Neither the creation nor any particular creatures will ever be deified. The creator exists necessarily and independently, but the creature exists dependently. This creator-creature distinction lends credibility to the notion that there are logically two kinds of knowledge in God. First, God knows himself and all things compatible with himself (his natural knowledge or *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*); and second, God knows everything that is outside of himself (his free knowledge or *scientia visionis*). Said in another way, God knows his own nature and he knows his decree with respect to everything that exists (or did or will exist) outside of himself.

By firmly maintaining this two-fold distinction, the CC explanation eliminates the pre-volitional, third type of knowledge which was the source of difficulty for both the MK and CMK views. It also avoids the problem of MK in which it seems that God's knowledge is dependent, at least in some sense, on creatures. God is truly independent from creation and does not look to it for his knowledge.

### God Knows Counterfactuals

Before we can be confident in answering the question of *how* God knows counterfactuals, we need to be assured *that* he knows them in the first place. To this logically prior question, we can give an affirmative answer for two reasons. First, there are many counterfactual statements in the Bible that are presented as true and as thus are objects of

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<sup>113</sup>See Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, pp. 161–89. Note though that Helm is describing his view of the doctrine of foreknowledge in general, of which his view of counterfactuals is only a part.

God's knowledge. Second, it is logically feasible that God knows them because of a more specific version of the correspondence theory of truth. These reasons will now be explained.

God can know counterfactuals, first of all, because the face value of many Bible passages indicates that he does. How he knows them is not as clear, but that he knows them is quite clear. All of the examples listed earlier could be marshaled here. For one, consider 1 Corinthians 2:8. The counterfactual is "If X then Y," where X = "the rulers of this age understood the wisdom of God" and Y = "they would not have crucified the Lord." Even though X did not happen, the Bible asserts that God knew the consequent to be true if the antecedent had been; this makes the whole counterfactual true. It may have been that God knew that the rulers had enough common sense not to kill the Son of God; it might be that God knew his own intervention in showing them the wisdom of God may have included his bringing them to salvation; or it may have been some other possibility. Regardless, it seems hard to deny the truth of 1 Corinthians 2:8 given a high view of Scripture including inspiration and inerrancy. In this much, the CC view agrees with the MK and CMK views—that God does in fact possess counterfactual knowledge.

At this point, it may be objected that if God knows counterfactuals as truths, then he must have middle knowledge, and the CC view is no different than MK. But this objection is based on a conflation of two distinct ideas. Counterfactual knowledge is one thing, and how God knows counterfactuals, whether by MK or some other mechanism, is another thing. We can say that God knows counterfactuals without accepting MK and all of the baggage that comes with it, and that is precisely what the CC explanation does.<sup>114</sup>

True counterfactuals are more than mere possibilities, so it is not enough to say that God knows them as possibilities. He knows them as the *woulds* of situations that never in fact come to pass. They are more certain than mere possibilities.<sup>115</sup> To look at it from the opposite perspective, false counterfactuals are not possibilities at all. In decreeing the world that is, God gave true counterfactuals their truth and false counterfactuals their falsity. They exist no more in the realm of possibility. Another way to explain the notion of counterfactuals as more than possibilities is to examine the two component parts of the counterfactual. The antecedent X was genuinely a possibility (feasible for

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<sup>114</sup>That MK baggage includes that God has a third type of knowledge, that he knows the decisions libertarianly free creatures would make in every possible situation, that he has no power over those decisions, that he uses this knowledge in his creation of the universe, and that there is no certain ground for the truth of such counterfactuals.

<sup>115</sup>Consider Mark 14:21: "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." This is a reality, not just a possibility. That is, this statement says more than "it was possible for it to be better for him, but it was also possible for it to be worse." Rather, it was only possible for it to be better. Note the counterfactual form: "If he had not been born, it would have been better for him."

God) before the decree. The consequent Y was also a genuine possibility when considered separate from the antecedent. But after the decree, the antecedent became an impossibility since it would not come to pass. After the decree, God can no longer know the whole counterfactual statement as a possibility since its antecedent is impossible. So if he does not know it as a possibility, does he know it as an impossibility? In a sense, yes, because it will never come to pass. But in another sense, it can also be described as a true counterfactual (a true impossibility). Had he decided to decree the antecedent, he is telling us he also would have decided to decree the consequent. With the subjunctive in the antecedent, we understand the full form of the counterfactual is this: “if [God had decreed] X [(though he did not)], then [God would have decreed] Y.” This is a true statement—that is what God would have done. It will not come to pass, but it is true.

The second support for the feasibility of God knowing counterfactuals is that the counterfactual corresponds to a reality in God. A serious objection to the notion that God can know counterfactuals is that counterfactuals must be false because they do not correspond to something that comes to pass.<sup>116</sup> This objection to counterfactuals relies on a particular understanding of truth, the correspondence view of truth, which basically says that truth is what corresponds to reality.<sup>117</sup> Since the counterfactual never becomes reality, the question arises as to how it can be true.

But in addition to the Bible passages that appear to show God knows counterfactuals as true, it seems reasonable to believe that they are true based on a more particular version of the correspondence theory of truth. All that is necessary for a counterfactual to be true is that it corresponds to how God understands things, not necessarily that they come to pass. Just because something does not come to pass does not mean that it is not true. All that is required for a counterfactual to be true is that the consequent would have followed had the antecedent come to pass. This view of truth is not divorced from reality, because it finds some of its basis in the way God decreed things to be (the character of the person making the decision, the non-variable circumstances, etc.). It finds the remainder of its basis in how God would have decreed differently had he decreed the antecedent to come to pass. This could have included changes in the creaturely decision, changes in the circumstances, and changes in God’s activity that surrounded that

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<sup>116</sup>Another objection comes from the libertarian non-MK advocate, that counterfactuals cannot be true because they make a statement about what a free creature definitely *would* do. Since the creature could choose A, B, or C, to say that he *would definitely* choose B is false, because he really could choose the others. This argument is made in William Hasker, “Reply to Basinger on Power Entailment,” *FP* 5 (January 1988): 87–90. Hasker’s objection does not apply to my compatibilist view, since I do not admit that there are multiple genuine “possibilities” in the sense he uses the term.

<sup>117</sup>For an introduction to various theories of truth, see Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 235–51.

decision.<sup>118</sup> In the end, all truth, even counterfactual truth, finds its ground of truth in God and not in the creation *per se*.

### **God Knows Counterfactuals in His Natural and in His Free Knowledge**

One of the primary objections to MK and CMK is that the objects of middle knowledge seem to be known by God in either his necessary knowledge or his free knowledge. Turretin supports this notion that God's necessary and free knowledge together encompass all knowable things.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, an important step to understanding how God knows counterfactuals is to determine whether such knowledge should be placed in his natural or in his free knowledge. But it is at this very point where the literature shows either debate or confusion. Recall that Laing places God's counterfactual knowledge in his free knowledge. Frame places counterfactual knowledge in God's natural knowledge.

But, the point is also confused or at least not clearly stated, as can be demonstrated from a couple of sources. Campbell writes, "On the contrary, counterfactuals of creaturely freedom *are* known *only* posterior to the divine decree."<sup>120</sup> This would require that such knowledge is placed in God's free knowledge. Later in the same paper, he writes, "Therefore, contrary to Molina, Tiessen, and Ware, middle knowledge reduces to *natural* and, hence, is simply not needed for a robust doctrine of providence."<sup>121</sup> So which is it? Should counterfactuals be placed in God's natural knowledge or his free knowledge?

A similar confusion is seen in Gottfried Leibniz as quoted and interpreted by Robert Sleight. Note Sleight's comment: "[Leibniz] can account for God's knowledge of [the Keilah counterfactual] without appeal to anything other than what is required in order to account for any item of God's knowledge of simple intelligence."<sup>122</sup> Simple intelligence refers to God's natural or necessary knowledge, also known as his *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*. However, two pages later, Sleight writes, "The clear implication of Leibniz's reconstruction seems to be that God's knowledge of contingent counterfactual conditionals about actual individuals—including contingent counterfactual conditionals of freedom—is post-volitional."<sup>123</sup> This would make counterfactual

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<sup>118</sup>Both Craig and Campbell support the notion that there are true counterfactuals that do not come to pass. See Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection,'" pp. 338–39 and Campbell, "Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique," pp. 10–11.

<sup>119</sup>Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:214. What God knows by middle knowledge actually belongs in one of the other two categories.

<sup>120</sup>Campbell, "Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique," p. 15.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., p. 21, emphasis added.

<sup>122</sup>Robert Sleight, "Leibniz on Divine Foreknowledge," *FP* 11 (October 1994): 562.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., pp. 564–65.

knowledge part of God's free knowledge, or *scientia visionis*.<sup>124</sup>

This confusion is not without reason. It comes about because the definition of "counterfactual" that is used is not consistent. Recall from the introduction above that the term can be used in several related but different senses. Disambiguating these senses is a key to properly understanding the question posed in this essay. Sleigh's first use of counterfactual really refers to possibilities before the decree; the second use of counterfactual refers to actualities after the decree.

Before proceeding further, I propose the following notation to clarify the distinction between the different uses of the term *counterfactual*. With respect to conditional subjunctives of the form [CF] if X then Y, there are three ways that the term *counterfactual* may be used:

CF-NK = counterfactuals in God's natural knowledge. These subjunctive conditionals encompass all possibilities. Logically speaking, before the decree they are all equally plausible but none are true or false per se. They are only *possibilities*, in the sense that they are consistent with God's nature, and God could choose to instantiate some of them by his decree.<sup>125</sup>

CF-FK = counterfactuals in God's free knowledge. These subjunctive conditionals are the conditionals which God decreed would have a false antecedent. Even though they have a false antecedent, they may be true or false as a whole statement. God knows the truth or falsity of them as part of his free knowledge. The conditionals that are true as a whole statement belong to what I called earlier the restricted definition of counterfactual.<sup>126</sup>

CF-HK = counterfactuals in human knowledge. These are subjunctive conditionals which appear equally plausible from the human perspective but which may in the end turn out to be either facts (conditionals with a true antecedent and true consequent) or true counterfactuals or false counterfactuals. Because humans cannot know the future, even false counterfactuals may seem to be "equally possible" or they may even seem to be true when in fact God knows them to be false.

So, CF-FK is a subset of CF-NK. Out of the conditionals in CF-NK, God decreed certain circumstances to come to pass. The conditionals whose antecedents and consequents would come to pass become the *facts*. The conditionals whose antecedents will not come to pass but whose consequents *would be* true had the antecedent been

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<sup>124</sup>Note that when this term is used, it refers to God's knowledge of the actual world as he has decreed it to be. It does not imply that God obtains this knowledge by prescience or "vision" of the future.

<sup>125</sup>Guleserian calls the subset of these CF-NK conditionals that have to do with the choices of creatures *subjunctive conditionals of freedom*. Theodore Guleserian, "Ontological Determination and the Grounding Objection to Counterfactuals of Freedom," *FP* 25 (October 2008): 395.

<sup>126</sup>Guleserian calls the subset of these CF-FK conditionals that have to do with the free choices of creatures *genuine counterfactuals of freedom*. See *ibid.*, p. 395.

true become the *true counterfactuals*. This is so because God knew and decided that he would see to it that the consequent would come to pass had he also decreed the antecedent to come to pass. Finally, the remaining conditionals are *false counterfactuals*. These false counterfactuals have the property that “if X then Y” is not true as a whole statement, either because the outcome is opposite of the true counterfactual (and is thus false), or because the circumstances just never come to pass.

This can be illustrated from the example of 1 Samuel 23:

- (1) if David stays in Keilah, Saul will capture him = true CF
- (2) if David leaves Keilah, Saul will capture him = false CF
- (3) if David stays in Keilah, Saul will not capture him = false CF
- (4) if David leaves Keilah, Saul will not capture him = fact

We should note that the revelation given to David in 1 Samuel 23 only includes the counterfactual [1]. By knowing that, he knows that [3] is false as well. But the text does not tell us that he has certainty about [2] or [4]. From God’s perspective, and in our hindsight we see that [2] was false and [4] was fact. But from David’s perspective with his CF-HK at the time of his departure, he probably still wondered if Saul will capture him out in the wilderness at some point. In other words, [2] and [4] probably seemed equally likely as counterfactuals. Such CF-HK counterfactuals are a subset of God’s CF-NK. Divine revelation served to narrow down the field of counterfactuals that David had to worry about, but it did not make CF-HK equal to CF-FK, at least at the time of the crisis.

Based upon this taxonomy, what Campbell should have clarified is that:

1. Counterfactuals of compatibilist creaturely freedom are known only posterior to the divine decree, and thus are part of God’s free knowledge. These are CF-FKs.

2. Statements with a counterfactual form (whether actual or not actual) are known in God’s natural knowledge as part of his knowledge of all possibilities, as CF-NKs.

So does God know counterfactuals in his natural or his free knowledge? The answer is yes to both, depending on the definition of counterfactual being utilized! Since this essay is concerned about how God knows counterfactuals (and not how humans know them), the task reduces to two simpler questions. First, how does God know counterfactuals of the CF-NK type? And second, how does God know CF-FK counterfactuals? We will examine these questions in turn in the next sections.

### **God Knows CF-NK Counterfactuals as Feasible**

The answer to the first question is rather straightforward. God knows CF-NK counterfactuals as things that are feasible for him to instantiate in a created world because they agree with his nature. How God knows these CF-NK counterfactuals is simply that he knows

himself. This is an immediate, intuitive, non-discursive, and non-deliberative knowledge which encompasses everything that God is and could decide to do.<sup>127</sup> As such, CF-NK-type counterfactuals are no different than any other object of God's natural knowledge. They can be considered "possibilities" if that word is divorced from its "random" or "pure chance" connotation.

God does not know raw possibilities, by which I mean events that might or might not occur randomly or by chance. Chance does not rule over God. Something is possible because it is agreeable to God's character and He can bring it about. For example, it is impossible for God to turn himself into something that is not God. On the other hand, it was possible that Peter would not deny Christ (perhaps Thomas would have instead, or none of the disciples). But this was not determined on a toss of dice. Such possible things are not probabilistic things. Rather, a possible in this sense becomes actual when God decrees it to be. All things owe their possibility or actuality to the character and will of God, not to fate or random chance.

The CC view is a soft-deterministic view. It does not go as far as hard determinism, but it does make clear that God knows things with certainty because of his decree, with no probabilities attached.<sup>128</sup> The CC view avoids the "possibility" problems with MK and CMK. Recall that one argument against MK was that it is unclear how something can be "possible" in God's NK yet not actualizable due to his MK. How then is it genuinely possible? Even worse, if a creaturely choice was a real possibility in the random/libertarian sense, then it was unclear how God could know it in advance of it happening. Tiessen realized that CMK suffers the same kind of problem, in that the *coulds* are really no different than the *woulds*, and so the third type of knowledge collapses into the other two.

### **God Knows CF-FK Counterfactuals Because He Knows His Will and Himself**

The explanation of how God knows CF-FK counterfactuals is more involved. We must now consider the more strict definition of a counterfactual, that is, a subjunctive conditional whose antecedent has been decreed to be false. Such CF-FKs follow the decree and thus must belong to God's free knowledge since there are only two logical types of knowledge in God, and the counterfactual is beyond the "possibility stage" because it implies a corresponding fact that has been decreed.

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<sup>127</sup>*Discursive* refers to the process of moving to a conclusion by reason or argument rather than intuition.

<sup>128</sup>*Soft determinism* is also called *non-constraining causation*, in which an event is rendered certain but not fatalistically necessary. Freedom and causation are compatible in the soft determinist view. *Hard determinism* means that there is no human free will and every event is causally determined by God, who freely chose how to actualize the world. *Fatalism* goes further and suggests that not even God had freedom to choose how to actualize the world.

But it is even more complicated than that.

The example of Matthew 11:20–24 will help to explain the complexity. The relevant counterfactual is this: “If these miracles had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented.” The miracles were not done there, so this is definitely counter to the facts.

In literature on the subject of counterfactuals, most from the middle knowledge perspective, the approach is to label this counterfactual as a counterfactual of creaturely freedom, and to look at it in that light. That is, the counterfactual is assumed to be of the form “If agent S were in circumstances C, then he would freely choose A,” where agent S = residents of Tyre and Sidon; C = Christ’s miracles were done then and there; and A = to repent. The focus is on the residents of Tyre and Sidon and their response to the miracles. In a sense it is as if they operate in a vacuum with various circumstances presented to them, and they choose one way or the other. God simply happens to know, in the MK and CMK views, how they will respond.

But there is far more going on “behind the scenes” than that. God is involved as well. God has made some decisions about what to do with the residents of Tyre and Sidon, and how to do it. MK advocates may object at this point that God’s action is included in “circumstances C.” In response, it should be noted that the counterfactual should not only focus on creaturely freedom, but it should also take into account divine freedom. And it must do so in both antecedent and consequent. Actually, God’s freedom should be emphasized even more than man’s in every case because God is the initiator and originator of all things. God decides whether or not to do special miracles in Tyre and Sidon. God decides how he will work through his grace to achieve the desired response.

The counterfactual’s consequent (the desired response) is not entirely specified, because the nature of the repentance is not fully specified. The repentance could be of a common-grace sort in which the residents of Tyre and Sidon would have expressed genuine sorrow over their bad behavior and amend their ways, but where such sorrow would not be integrated with a faith-response toward God which accompanies salvation. On the other hand, the repentance could have been unto salvation, associated as it would need to be, with faith in the God who produced the miracles. A similar interpretive difficulty attends the interpretation of Jonah’s Ninevites, who repented in sackcloth at the announcement of impending doom (Jonah 3:5–10). Was this a salvific repentance or not? Interpreters do not agree at this point. With the later judgment proclaimed against Nineveh just a few generations later (by the prophet Nahum), it does not seem likely that there was a true mass conversion at Jonah’s preaching.

In either case, an action of God had to be done to make the counterfactual true. In the “human repentance” case, God would have had to decree to send a messenger and enable him to work miracles and (presumably) call the residents of Tyre and Sidon to repentance. In the “salvific repentance” case, God had to act to send the messenger (as

above), and also act to draw those residents to himself and enlighten them and give them the gift of salvation.<sup>129</sup> Perhaps if they had exercised human repentance, God would have decreed to follow up later with an efficacious work of grace to save them. Regardless, we do not have to commit to either explanation (human or salvific repentance) to understand that the counterfactual cannot leave God out of the equation—that is, it is not a counterfactual of creaturely freedom alone. All counterfactuals involve God, because they would involve a change in his decree to make the antecedent true, and they would involve other changes in his decree with respect to bringing about the consequent. It is particularly important to include divine intervention in bringing about the consequent when it involves salvation—an event which requires God’s life-giving work on the agent.

Given the significant place of God in the counterfactual truth, the next step is to consider how the counterfactual relates to God’s knowledge of his decree and of himself. He knows based on his knowledge of his decree that Tyre and Sidon did not have the benefit of the miracles, and that they did not in fact repent. But if we take as a given the truth of the counterfactual, Jesus is saying in Matthew 11, “If it had been God’s decree to send the miracles to Tyre and Sidon, then God would also have decreed that they would have repented.” This implies that God knows his decree and he knows how slight changes in his decree would result in other changes to the decree.

It seems best to explain that God knows the counterfactual on a two-fold basis:

1. He knows the counterfactual, in part, based on his decree. He knows how he decreed the residents of Tyre and Sidon to be as people; he knows all the circumstances surrounding their lives, etc. The counterfactual residents of Tyre and Sidon are presented to be identical in every respect to the historical residents of Tyre and Sidon, except that they had the benefit of miracles to help them change their minds. So, God’s actual decree is relevant in determining how they would react in slightly different circumstances.

2. God also knows the counterfactual, in part, based on his knowledge of himself. That is to say, he knows that if he changed his decree in the way specified in the antecedent of the counterfactual, then it would be his inclination to change his decree in the way specified in the consequent of the counterfactual. This implies he knows the possibilities for how he will act to bring about all the possible consequents, and he knows how he would be inclined to choose among those possibilities. His inclinations arise from all his other attributes, such as his justice, love, holiness, etc.

In this way, we cannot strictly say that God knows CF-FK counterfactuals as part of his free knowledge only, for counterfactuals add the complexity that God knows how he would change his decree (how

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<sup>129</sup>It should be evident that I do not believe in a universal prevenient grace given to all people.

his FK could have been different). He must know the feasible ways to modify the consequent, from his NK, and which way he would choose to take. The counterfactual is telling us what way he would certainly choose in the hypothetical case. For all practical purposes, then, CF-FK is an appropriate name for these counterfactuals, because *the truth of the counterfactual rests on how God decided he would change the consequent given a different antecedent*. Thus the CC view places God's knowledge of counterfactuals in his free knowledge and as logically following his decree.

This sounds like a hybrid natural+free knowledge explanation for how God knows counterfactuals. In a sense, that is true. But in another sense, it is not. God consults his natural knowledge in the formulation of his decree. But we do not see this as "mixing" his natural and free knowledge together into a third type of knowledge. Similarly, for him to consult his natural knowledge in the formulation of how he would vary his decree for a counterfactual seems to be a substantially similar use of his natural knowledge that does not result in a third type of knowledge. It simply results in additional subject matter known by God in his free knowledge. Therefore, the CC explanation is a free knowledge explanation of how God knows counterfactuals.

What has been described may sound like a deliberative process—or worse, like an iterative-deliberative process where God bounces back and forth between his decree/free knowledge and his natural knowledge. Theologically, it is highly problematic to allow a deliberative process in which God arrives at knowledge that he did not previously have. Rather, his omniscience encompasses all things simultaneously. In the tradition of those who write on this subject, I espouse a "logical" view of God's knowledge. The iteration can be "flattened" by observing that in making the decree, God also decides how he will handle all necessary counterfactuals in one grand decision.

To return to the earlier argument about the correspondence theory of truth, the CC view explains why a counterfactual can be true at all (recall this is the question logically prior to the one asked by this essay). The truth of the counterfactual is not found in its correspondence to reality, since it never comes to pass. Rather, its truth is found in its correspondence to the way that God would change his decree. It is as if God says, "OK, if you are going to demand of me how I would do things if this antecedent were true, I will tell you. I already decided that I would bring about *this* particular consequent."<sup>130</sup> The truth of the counterfactual is found in the reality of how God would modify his ways. Such things can be true even though they never come to pass, because they specify a truth about God and his decree and his nature.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>This seems to imply an "all else being equal" notion. That is, God is saying, "All else being equal, except this particular change of antecedent, this is the new consequent."

<sup>131</sup>I am making use of a Van Til-style combination of consciously-theistic

In conclusion to this subsection, the CC view explains God's knowledge of counterfactuals by using both his free and natural knowledge. The CC explanation emphasizes that God's knowledge of counterfactuals (the more restricted variety) must logically follow his decree and is thus part of his free knowledge.

### **God Knows CF-FK Counterfactuals on a Compatibilist Basis**

The CC view, as its name implies, espouses a compatibilist view of human freedom. This is helpful because, as the CMK view clarified, God can know the free choices of creatures on a compatibilist basis. With libertarian free choice in stock MK, the outcome could not be known in advance, since there are no conditions that are sufficient to pin down what the decision will be in advance of it.

Compatibilist freedom is the view that the human's will is free and yet at the same time caused.<sup>132</sup> That is to say, freedom and determinism are compatible.<sup>133</sup> In this essay, compatibilism is of the soft-determinist sort where the causation is due to past events, the laws of nature, the person's inclinations, and God's intervention.<sup>134</sup> The causal aspect of compatibilism is "non-constraining" in the sense that God renders the act of the will certain, but not fatalistically so, and in a way that maintains human responsibility.<sup>135</sup> Certainty is thus distanced

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correspondence and coherence theories of truth. The correspondence is not to facts or states of affairs in themselves, but instead the correspondence is to the way God sees things. See Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity series, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), pp. 1–2.

<sup>132</sup>See Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians," p. 468. Feinberg provides good explanations of compatibilism in "God Ordains All Things," pp. 19–43 and *No One Like Him*, pp. 635–39. Another defender of compatibilism is Helm, *The Providence of God*, pp. 66–68.

<sup>133</sup>As such, compatibilism consists of more than the general thesis "human freedom and divine foreknowledge are *compatible*." It offers a somewhat deeper explanation of *how* they are compatible and is associated with a non-libertarian view of freedom. Flint offers a defense of the general thesis from a libertarian perspective in "In Defence of Theological Compatibilism," *FP* 8 (April 1991): 237–43. Kai Nielsen defends the thesis, but from a compatibilist stance ("The Compatibility of Freedom and Determinism" in *Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002], pp. 39–46). It is very common among evangelicals to simply leave the two doctrines of freedom and foreknowledge/sovereignty in tension or "antinomy." E.g., D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

<sup>134</sup>I have expanded on the definition offered by Fischer in "Compatibilism," in John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, and Manuel Vargas, *Four Views on Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), p. 44. He only includes past events and natural laws, but this does not seem sufficient, given that God can intervene in miraculous ways, particularly today in regeneration.

<sup>135</sup>Stewart Goetz develops a case for the opposing view, namely that free agents choose without causation, in order to maintain human responsibility ("Libertarian Choice," *FP* 14 [April 1997]: 195–211).

from “forced necessity” so that the creature’s freedom is not just an illusion. The human will is free, not in a libertarian or indifferent sense, but in the sense that the person has a voluntary freedom or freedom of inclination.

This CC view, coupled with the earlier assertion about God knowing counterfactuals by knowing his decree and knowing himself, effectively dispatches the grounding objection that is raised against MK views. The ground of the truths of counterfactuals is found in God’s free knowledge, as influenced by his natural knowledge of how he would adjust his decree in various circumstances. He can know the choices of creatures in the actual world, and in similar but slightly different counterfactual worlds, because he knows all of the factors, including the inclinations of the creatures, that lead to the decisions they make.

Instead of accepting the complicated machinery of middle knowledge, it is far easier to postulate that God knows himself and also knows so well the character of morally responsible agents as he has created them that he knows what they would do in slightly different circumstances. Middle knowledge proponents do not, to this author’s knowledge, demonstrate that this is not a viable explanation to the passages they cite in support of their view.<sup>136</sup> To say that someone would choose cookies over liver presupposes that we are talking about someone who has a known set of desires as created by God, and that the offer of liver or cookies will not in itself change those desires from what we observe in our world apart from such an offer. The truth of a counterfactual rests, in part, on how things (people) are by God’s design. The truth of it also rests on how God knows he would change his own decree and intervention if he were to make the offer of liver or cookies. Perhaps he would decide to change the person’s nature so that he hated cookies and desired liver!

### CC Is Different than Feinberg’s Soft Determinist MK

Above, John Feinberg’s mild CMK position was mentioned (Soft Determinist MK, hereafter, SDMK).<sup>137</sup> His view was not used as a foil in that section because Tiessen and Ware were much more forceful proponents of the “coulds and woulds” version of MK. Feinberg’s position is more soft determinist and less MK-like than Ware and Tiessen. This puts it very close to the compatibilist counterfactual explanation offered here, so it is easy to wonder if the two views differ in any significant ways.

Our views are admittedly quite similar. For instance, Feinberg’s

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<sup>136</sup>See Craig, *Only Wise God*, p. 137, n. 1, where he admits the possibility of other explanations, but he believes that middle knowledge is so useful as to override this possibility.

<sup>137</sup>See particularly his *No One Like Him*, pp. 747–52. He also briefly addresses the issue in Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” pp. 33–34.

SDMK rejects libertarian freedom because it does not offer a clear way for God to know certainly what a creature *would* do.<sup>138</sup> He also believes that counterfactuals can indeed be true, and God can know them on a compatibilist basis, at least on the basis of the antecedents that he sees in other possible worlds. Both views also share a soft-determinist framework.

However, there are some differences. First, Feinberg retains the MK terminology which I jettison entirely to avoid all of its Catholic and Arminian undercurrents, among other reasons. There is no need for the term, even in Feinberg's system, because (1) his definition of MK seems to be just that middle knowledge is the knowledge of counterfactuals, which does not require middle knowledge terminology; and (2) his SDMK is post-volitional, not pre-volitional, which discards the second major premise of MK (libertarian freedom being the other major premise). The CC explanation offered here avoids the historical baggage of MK by calling the explanation more clearly what it is: a compatibilist counterfactual explanation. It is not a third type of knowledge in God.

Second and more significant is that the CC explanation offers a more in-depth analysis of various types of counterfactuals (CF-NK, CF-FK, and CF-HK) and how God knows them. The subject matter of God's free knowledge includes both what will occur and what would occur in different circumstances, and both of these are influenced by God's natural knowledge. In this, CC is an advance over SDMK because Feinberg does not explain this interplay between natural and free in the formulation of the decree with regard to things that will be, and with regard to counterfactuals.

Third, the CC view says that God's knowledge of counterfactuals is not *middle* of his natural and free knowledge. If anything, it would be logically or explanatorily *after* his "regular" free knowledge since it presumes the way things will be has been settled by the decree, thus giving relevance to various counterfactual situations. Feinberg does not seem to explain how SDMK can be *middle* or even how it differs from free knowledge even though both come after the decree. Perhaps it is middle in his view just because it has a different sort of content.

Fourth, CC clearly distinguishes God's knowledge of counterfactuals from his knowledge of possibilities. Feinberg seems to say the opposite when he writes:

Middle knowledge (as knowledge of counterfactuals) is knowledge of possibilities, not actualities. Since middle knowledge is a knowledge of what *might* occur, it is irrelevant to the question of how God can know what *will* happen in the future. Moreover, middle knowledge does not entail that God knows what *could* happen if something else occurred, but rather what *would* happen if something else occurred.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, p. 751.

<sup>139</sup>Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," p. 34.

This is somewhat unclear as to the interplay of “might” and “could” and “would.” But it is clear that he treats counterfactuals as possibilities. The CC view is more defined because it says that God does not know counterfactuals as possibilities. Possibilities are reserved for God’s natural knowledge before the decree. Counterfactuals are actually impossibilities because they will never come to pass. However, God knows true counterfactuals as “true impossibilities” because the counterfactual specifies the truth of what God would have done if he had decreed other circumstances to come to pass. False counterfactuals are those counterfactuals that will not or would not have come to pass. God knows them as “false impossibilities.” That sounds strange, but all it means is that God knows the event is not going to happen, and even if circumstances had changed somewhat, it still would not have happened because God would not have wanted it to.

The bottom line is that the CC view has some notable differences with the SDMK view, even though they also have substantial similarities.

### Summary

This section presented a Calvinist, compatibilist, two-knowledge explanation of how God knows counterfactuals. It avoids some of the problems of the MK and CMK views presented above because it relies on neither libertarian freedom nor a pre-volitional, third type of knowledge. God does know true counterfactuals as truths despite the fact that they never come to pass; their ground is found in his decree and how he decided he would change that decree in slightly different hypothetical situations. An important claim made in this section is that the definition of terms is the key to properly understanding how God knows counterfactuals. If by the term *counterfactual* is meant all statements, before the decree, of the form “if X, then Y,” then God knows such statements together with his knowledge of all things feasible for him to create in his natural knowledge. These are the CF-NKs. If by the term is meant all such statements that actually end up having false antecedents, then God knows these as part of his free knowledge. These are the CF-FKs.

What remains is to provide some explanation of how the CC explanation affects other areas of theology and what practical implications it has for Christians. These issues will be briefly addressed next.

### IMPLICATIONS AND SUMMARY

After all the technical matters regarding counterfactuals are laid out, the inevitable question arises: What difference does all this make? Why is it important how God knows counterfactuals? Does this affect the average Christian in some important way? The answer to this question comes in two parts, which will be addressed in turn in the following sections.

### Theological Implications

One important theological implication of the CC view is related to the doctrine of man's depravity. Sin has wrecked not only mankind in general, but also each individual's will, morality, personality, intellect, and all of his capacities. This ruin results in the complete inability of mankind, without the help of God, to please God (Rom 8:8). Depravity is most visible in the realm of "spiritual things." It may be manifested to lesser degrees in other departments of a person's life (e.g., his understanding of basic mathematics), but it nonetheless affects the whole of his existence, including his decision-making. This rebuts the libertarian view of freedom and undercuts the MK view immediately. Sin is a severe limiter on man's "free will" as popularly described. To understand that God knows counterfactuals apart from pure freedom of indifference is important because it has an important connection to the doctrines of anthropology, hamartiology, and soteriology.

A second implication of the CC view is that it does not leave room for extended application of counterfactuals to a seemingly infinite number of non-realized worlds. Nor does it need to explain how God formulated his decree with a third type of knowledge that is in some sense based outside of himself. In short, a simpler explanation can be made for the counterfactuals that are presented in the Bible, without appealing to an elaborate scheme that expands their role to a seemingly ubiquitous place in theology. Obviously the explanation adopted in this essay touches a lot of areas of theology, but it does not present itself as a nearly universal solution to theological difficulties.

For example, consider the imputation of Adam's sin mentioned as an application of MK. It is sufficient to explain that God constituted Adam as the federal head of the human race and decided that Adam's sin would be accounted to the whole race. The decision to have things to be this way is thus attributed directly to God without having God examine the intentions of every creature he could have created as to how it would have responded in the same circumstances that Adam faced. In any case, the MK advocate would acknowledge that it was God's decree that set things the way they are. Any mystery that remains should be considered as part of God's internal counsel. Any charge of unfairness should be dismissed as Paul does in Romans 9:19–24.

As another example, recall the application of MK to the salvation of infants. MK proposes that God judges an infant who dies on the basis of what the infant would have done later in life. But this approach leaves out a key party to the salvation transaction, namely God. The counterfactual is "if baby X had lived, he would have freely accepted Christ." The MK view proposes to leave God out of the consequent by making the choice totally up to X in his future adult years. But according to the CC view, the counterfactual should be written this way: "if [God had decreed] baby X to live, then [God also would have drawn/convicted/effectually called] him to accept Christ." There

is no biblical text that suggests such a counterfactual is true in any particular case, nor in all cases of babies dying in infancy. Since the fact is that the baby dying in infancy did not exercise conscious faith, it is more sensible to use a traditional explanation—either God regenerates all such infants, or none, or just the elect ones. This answer may be less than satisfying, since it pushes the question back to the underlying question of election, but again, this makes explicit that the decision was fully God's since the baby was unable at any time to make a decision.

A final implication is that the CC view, of course, rises or falls with the underlying doctrine of soft determinism or compatibilist freedom. A full case for that doctrine is outside of the scope of this essay.<sup>140</sup>

### Practical and Pastoral Implications

The most important practical or pastoral concern with respect to MK and counterfactuals has to do with God's guidance in making decisions, particularly "big ones" such as college, choice of a spouse, changes in job or ministry, etc. How can we know the right path?

To illustrate, consider an unmarried fellow named John who is dating a girl named Jane. He is unsure whether to ask her to marry him. But he knows in his CF-HK that there are a number of possible outcomes. The probability to assign to each counterfactual is unknown to John, but he supposes that God knows, so he prays and asks God. Like David in Keilah, he would hope to have the answer laid out clearly. At least it would be helpful to have some of the possibilities eliminated by God revealing whether they are true or false counterfactuals.

If we examine the situation from the perspective offered in this essay, we will notice a couple of things. First, John has CF-HK. All of the possibilities he has considered seem like genuine possibilities. God knows better in his CF-FK, but he also knows what John will decide. This factors into which of these counterfactuals are even relevant. Second, even if God regularly did reveal his CF-FK in such circumstances, it would not at all be necessary to assume that God has MK in order to help John with his decision. Remember, the question of whether God knows counterfactuals is a separate matter from *how* he does it. The CC explanation shows that God does know counterfactuals, and it explains the *how* in a much different manner than the MK explanation. In fact, God knows the character of Jane and his own future actions with respect to John and Jane. God knows whether she will be a committed wife, or whether she harbors the notion that if she doesn't end up liking John, she can always bail out by divorce. And he knows his own future actions that may sanctify Jane and John in their

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<sup>140</sup>For an outline of objections to the doctrine of compatibilist freedom, see Postiff, "How God Knows Counterfactuals," p. 88, n. 154.

relationship.

A third and important point is that God does not promise to reveal to us the future. We do not have the benefit of special revelation as David did. He was specially protected by God because of his future place on the throne of Israel and the whole Davidic covenant program. We do not have such promises, and therefore, such protection by God. That is to say, God does not promise to refine our CF-HK so that it matches more closely his CF-FK. We must use the information that is available to us. We can certainly pray to ask God for wisdom (skill in applying the Scripture and using the information available to us), but we cannot expect him to reveal the future. In the end, God's perfect knowledge of everything, including his knowledge of counterfactuals, is not available to us in advance (Deut 29:29).

### Summary

This essay proposed to answer the question "How does God know counterfactuals?" It began by defining the term *counterfactual* and then it examined three possible answers to the question.

The middle knowledge explanation presumes libertarian freedom and relies on a third type of knowledge between God's natural and free knowledge. MK has a number of problems that make it infeasible as an answer to the question of how God knows counterfactuals.

The Calvinistic variation of MK fared a little better since it eliminates the libertarian freedom of stock MK. However, it suffers from the grounding objection and the question of the stability and internal consistency of the view. The recent defection of Tiessen from the CMK camp shows that these concerns are well founded.

A Calvinist, compatibilist, two-knowledge view of God's knowledge of counterfactuals was then explained. Besides dealing with some of the shortcomings of the other two views, it offers an important contribution in terms of clarifying that there are multiple types of counterfactuals, depending on the perspective from which we look at them. The sense in which the term is used is a key in determining how God knows the particular type of counterfactual. God knows the "possibility-type" of counterfactuals in his natural knowledge. God knows counterfactuals strictly-defined after his decree in his free knowledge because it is the decree that gives certain antecedents and consequents truth. True counterfactuals are those whose antecedents will not come to pass, but whose consequents would have, had the antecedents come to pass. Though there is debate whether counterfactuals can be true if they do not match reality, I defended their truth on the basis that God knows his decree and how he would have changed it had he decreed other antecedents to come to pass. In effect, God's decree encompasses all that comes to pass, and all that he would have done in other, relevant circumstances. The truth of counterfactuals is grounded precisely there in God's decree. This explanation does not rely heavily on counterfactual knowledge to explain a number of issues such as the

salvation of infants and God's guidance. But it does offer coherent explanations of these and other problems without the difficulties that attend the middle knowledge explanation and its Calvinistic variant.