Molinism's kryptonite: Counterfactuals and circumstantial luck

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According to Molinism, logically prior to his creative decree, God knows via middle knowledge the truth value of the counterfactuals or conditionals of creaturely freedom (CFs) and thus what any possible person would do in any given circumstance. Critics of Molinism have pointed out that the Molinist God gets lucky that the CFs allow him to actualize either a world of his liking or even a good-enough world at all. In this paper, I advance and strengthen the popular critique in two ways. First, I specify the kind of luck to which God is subject, which is circumstantial moral luck. Second, and more importantly, I argue that exposure to this luck is problematic because something external to God and beyond his control determines the degree of praiseworthiness he deserves in relevant possible worlds. My main contention is that divine subjection to circumstantial moral luck raises the theoretical costs of Molinism.

Keywords: Molinism; middle knowledge; counterfactuals; moral luck; circumstantial luck.

I. Introduction

Philosophers interested in better understanding the divine nature have explored God's relationship to time, space, creation, morality, sin, and other features of reality, but largely unexplored is God's relationship to luck. In this paper, I'll argue that on a popular model of divine providence and omniscience, i.e., Molinism, there are circumstances in which God gets lucky. This conclusion has been reached before. However, this paper advances and strengthens the popular critique of Molinism in two ways: I specify the kind of luck to

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which God is subject and give reasons to think why exposure to this kind of luck leads to previously undetected problems. Specifically, I'll argue that luck limits the level of divine praiseworthiness that's exemplified in a possible world and then draw out the implications of this conclusion for the plausibility of Molinism.

The first step in my argument is to show that the Molinist God is subject to circumstantial moral luck. An agent is circumstantially lucky when the circumstances, or the situation in which the agent finds herself, are beyond her control and it significantly influences what she does. But is it even coherent or plausible to ask whether such a being could find himself in circumstances outside his control? I will argue that the answer is Yes because certain features of Molinism entail the presence of circumstantial luck within God's life. On Molinism, God's creative options depend on which counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (CFs) are true; in these creative scenarios, God is subject to circumstantial luck. The second step of my argument is to show how subjection to circumstantial moral luck impacts God's praiseworthiness, which leads to a serious problem for Molinists.

Richard Gale describes God's predicament on Molinism like this:

> ... the [CFs] are God's kryptonite, limiting his power in a similar way to that in which fate limits the powers of the Greek gods. In both cases there is a force or power above and beyond the control of individuals that limits their powers to do what they want. The idea that God must be lucky, that he must be dealt a favorable poker hand of [CFs], if he is to be able to realize his first choice—the creation of a universe containing moral good sans moral evil—strikes some as blasphemous, as a radical distortion of the orthodox concept of God's omnipotence. (Gale 1991: 144)

I'll offer an argument from luck that targets not God's omnipotence but his praiseworthiness. On Molinism, it is actually *luck*, not the existence of CFs, that is God's kryptonite. The outline of this paper is straightforward. I begin by explicating circumstantial luck in Section II and the central tenets of Molinism in Section III. Then, in Section IV, I argue that the God of Molinism is subject to circumstantial luck and consider some worries with this conclusion in Section V. I bring the paper to an end in Section VI.

II. Moral luck

Philosophers have recognized that there seems to be a conflict between our intuitions and certain practices regarding moral responsibility. Many people think we are responsible only for things within our control.[1] In normal circumstances, if I yank your steering wheel (just for fun) while we're on the highway and cause a major collision, it's pretty clear that you're not

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[1]There are other necessary requirements on responsibility, e.g. an epistemic requirement.

responsible for the accident. Here are even more obvious cases—again, in normal, non-engineered circumstances—in which you can't be held responsible: an asteroid crashing into the University of Birmingham, the Seattle Seahawks failing to win the Super Bowl, the President starting WW3, etc. As Thomas Nagel observes, 'Prior to reflection it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control' (Nagel 1993: 59). Cases like the ones above are easy to think of, and it seems like they elicit the strong moral intuition that some have called the Control Principle (CP), which states:

> (CP): We are morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control. (Nelkin 2019a)

But this plausible principle is at odds with some of our practices of assessing and holding each other morally responsible. Just think about two drunk drivers heading home but only one driver strikes and kills a pedestrian who happened to be crossing the road, or two teenagers rolling boulders down the hill, but only one boulder happened to roll onto the road and caused a collision. In these types of cases, all else being equal, we tend to hold the drunk driver and one of the teenagers more blameworthy than the others who didn't cause harm due to sheer luck; furthermore, many legal systems in the world recognize the moral nuances involved in these kinds of cases. We also tend to feel and express indignation, justifiably or not, toward individuals who bring about harm, even though luck played a role in the course of events leading to harm. So, on the one hand, we tend to think that one's moral responsibility shouldn't depend on factors beyond our control. But on the other hand, we nevertheless hold people responsible to different degrees even when luck is the determining factor. Thus, moral luck presents us with a dilemma, which can be put like this:

> [E]ither we adhere to the condition of control [CP] and then we would have to maintain that luck cannot play a role in our moral assessments, or else we acknowledge the inevitability of moral luck and then we must give up the condition of control [CP]. Since both the condition of control [CP] and the prevalence of moral luck seem philosophically plausible, perhaps even compelling, the dilemma points to a deep tension in any acceptable systemization of our moral judgments. (Enoch and Marmor 2007: 406)

Beginning in 1979, Bernard Williams and Nagel in separate publications cast doubt on CP and the common belief that morality was immune to the workings of luck. They didn't provide a clear definition of moral luck and didn't offer an analysis of luck itself. Williams admitted that he would 'use the notion of 'luck' generously [and] undefinedly' (Williams 1981: 22) and intended to suggest an oxymoron when he introduced the term 'moral luck' (Williams 1993: 251). As Nagel defined it, moral luck occurs when '[A] significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, [and] yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of

moral judgment' (Nagel 1979: 26). Until recently, this stipulative approach has been broadly accepted. However, some philosophers find this approach problematic, and debate continues about how best to define moral luck and which account of luck is the correct one to employ. Still, the standard view of moral luck seems to be this: lacking control is the essence of moral luck. Both Hartman (2017), Anderson (2019), and Enoch (2019) have argued that the puzzle of moral luck remains whether or not a convincing account of luck itself surfaces; lacking control over relevant factors is both necessary and sufficient to generate the paradox of moral luck. Anderson notes that the term 'moral luck' is a 'linguistic accident' and finding the correct theory of luck isn't required to make sense of moral luck because the problem of moral luck is best understood as the problem of 'moral lack of control' (Anderson 2019: 6). Below, I rely on the standard understanding of moral luck as lack of control to explain the concept of moral luck and later, divine moral luck.[2]

When we correctly treat the agent as an object of moral judgment, even though what the agent is assessed for partially depends on factors outside her control, we have an instance of moral luck (Nelkin 2019b). Simply put, moral luck occurs when factors beyond the agent's control affect her moral standing, i.e., the degree of praise or blame she justifiably deserves. Typically, attributions of blame and praise are appropriate responses to an agent's actions only if the agent is morally responsible for those actions. Importantly, our moral evaluation of the agent has to do with what she actually deserves (and not just receives). Thus, the kind of responsibility that's involved in moral luck is basic desert moral responsibility, according to which an agent is morally responsible for an action if 'she would deserve to be blamed if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve to be praised if she understood that it was morally exemplary' (Pereboom 2014: 2).

With this understanding of responsibility in place, we can now look at cases of moral luck. Two assassins shoot at their target 50 m away; one bullet successfully reaches the target while the other bullet's trajectory is thrown off by a bird that happens to be flying by. Both assassins intended to kill the target, but due to factors beyond their control, only one succeeded. If you think one assassin deserves more blame than the other, then your moral evaluation takes into consideration something that was beyond the control of both assassins, and thus moral luck has made a difference (Enoch and Marmor 2007: 406).

Philosophers typically offer cases of blameworthiness, presumably because those cases draw out clear intuitions about which agent bears greater

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[2]There is, however, wide disagreement about the existence of moral luck. Some philosophers accept the reality of moral luck, some deny it, and others accept only certain kinds of moral luck. But, for reasons concerning the limited scope of my investigation and space constraints, I'm not in a position to provide a defense of moral luck other than pointing to extant defenses, e.g. Moore 2009; Hanna 2014; Hartman 2017; Lang 2021; see also the classical work of Nagel and Williams.

culpability. But here's a case of moral luck concerning praiseworthiness. Suppose Batman and Robin are on the prowl in the streets of Gotham, looking for victims needing assistance. Two banks are being robbed on the same street, and they flip a coin to determine who goes to which bank. Batman flies into Central Gotham Bank, overpowers two robbers, and hands over the bag with the stolen money to the authorities; $1000 is recovered! Just down the street, Robin swoops into Gotham Credit Union, overpowers twenty robbers, and hands over bags with the stolen money to the authorities; $1,000,000 recovered! Although both have foiled a robbery and deserve praise, if you think Robin deserves more praise (in virtue of recovering more money and fighting off more robbers), then again, moral luck played a difference because it was the coinflip, presumably beyond their control, that determined their destination. Generally, to conjure up a case of moral luck, describe two nearly identical scenarios but modify one feature of the story that is beyond the agent's control and which makes a difference in moral responsibility (either in the degree of blame or praise), and you'll have a case of moral luck (Anderson 2019: 22).

Nagel perceived that moral luck comes in four varieties: constitutive, circumstantial, resultant, and causal luck. In this paper, I focus only on circumstantial moral luck. According to Nagel, circumstantial luck occurs when '[t]he things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, are importantly determined by factors beyond our control' (Nagel 1979: 33). Here's a classic example of circumstantial moral luck. Suppose you're born in Germany under the Nazi regime, eventually accept Nazi ideology, and become a guard in one of the concentration camps, performing many morally heinous acts. Next, suppose that in a near-possible world, your family moves to Argentina weeks after your birth, and you grow up to be an exemplary citizen. Are you blameworthy for becoming a Nazi and causing great suffering to others? It would seem so. But how can this be given that the circumstances in which you found yourself significantly influenced your actions, and those circumstances were entirely out of your control? It appears that circumstantial luck has made a moral difference.

Had you and I been in certain circumstances, we would've succumbed to one temptation or another, done the praiseworthy thing, acted wisely, behaved poorly, spoke harshly, and so on. Our moral record might have been different from what it is currently had we found ourselves in various circumstances that never obtained: circumstantial moral luck might have left an imprint on our moral formation. In circumstantial moral luck, some features of the agent's circumstances are beyond her control and affect her moral responsibility. As David Lewis colorfully described it, 'the most intelligible cases of moral luck are those in which the lucky and the unlucky alike are disposed to become wicked if tempted, and only the unlucky are tempted' (Lewis 1989: 56). When it's a matter of luck that we're in the wrong place at the wrong time and do the wrong thing, we're in the grip of circumstantial moral luck.

Notice that it's relatively easy to come up with scenarios of circumstantial luck because those scenarios feature limited, frail human beings. We lack control over many events and environments in which we make decisions. We're thrust into circumstances that significantly influence us, enabling us to act in specific ways, bend our dispositions, and shape our desires and goals. But what about God? Are there circumstances beyond God's control influencing how he acts in that specific situation? One might give a negative answer based on the following line of reasoning. A state of affairs is either contingent or necessary. If a state of affairs is necessary, then nobody, not even God, can have control over it. If the state of affairs is contingent, then God will have at least some control over it, and thus that state of affairs cannot be lucky for God. However, I show that this conclusion is unwarranted because, given certain entailments of the theory of middle knowledge, there are scenarios in which circumstantial luck appears in divine decision-making. Next, I'll give a sketch of Molinism and then explain where, on Molinism, God gets lucky.

III. The theory of middle knowledge

Molinism is a view of divine meticulous providence, according to which God wills or willfully permits everything that happens in a world. On this view, God controls—but doesn't cause, at least not in a direct way—absolutely everything. Yet, this divine control is compatible with creatures who perform actions that satisfy libertarian conditions on free will. This is one selling point of Molinism: adherence to a strong (and, as they argue, biblical) doctrine of God's providence without the need to compromise creaturely libertarian freedom. On Molinism, God gets what he wants; his plan for humankind cannot fail. But how can this be if he doesn't cause people to do what he wants? The answer is found in the theory of middle knowledge, an ingenious invention of the 16th-century Jesuit Luis de Molina.

According to Molinism, there are three logical moments (or stages) within God's knowledge and deliberation logically prior to God's decision to actualize a possible world.[3] Natural knowledge is God's knowledge of necessary truths, and because these truths don't depend on God's will, these truths are said to be *prevolitional*. Free knowledge is God's knowledge of contingent truths, and because these truths depend on God's will, they are *postvolitional*. Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of contingent truths that are *prevolitional*. However, these propositions are contingently true or false, and their truth value isn't determined by God.[4] Accordingly, middle knowledge stands

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[3]Following Plantinga (1974), a possible world is a maximally consistent state of affairs.

[4]The necessity and contingency involved here are metaphysical, such that a necessarily true proposition is true in all possible worlds and a contingently true proposition is true in at least one possible world.

midway between natural knowledge (which is knowledge of everything that is either necessary or possible) and free knowledge (which is knowledge of what is actual). What kinds of propositions are known via middle knowledge? Most importantly, counterfactuals or conditionals of CFs.

CFs are conditional propositions in the subjective mood, telling us what an agent *would* have done in various circumstances. Formally, a true CF is of the following form: if *S* were in circumstances *C*, S would freely do action *A*. The circumstances are freedom-preserving because they are indeterministic, so the agent isn't determined to act how he acts. For example, via middle knowledge, God knows from all eternity that if he placed Judas in very specific circumstances, Judas would freely deny Christ. In the same way, God knows what *you* would've done had you also been placed in those circumstances. For any possible person in any possible situation that involves action, God knows what that person would have done. Crucial to underline is that since God knows CFs via middle knowledge, his knowledge of them is prevolitional, meaning that they are true or false independent of his will. Thus, a true CF could have been false because the free creature could have done otherwise. This doesn't mean, however, that the creature determines the truth value because the CF is either true or false before the creature even exists.

This leads to one key difference between Molinism and other accounts of divine providence and knowledge: the claim that God knows the true CFs isn't exclusive to Molinism, but rather the claim that God knows the true CFs logically *prior* to his creative decree. Additionally, Molinism requires that he know *all* true CFs. In sum, God has middle knowledge *iff* God has exhaustive prevolitional knowledge of CFs (Freddoso 1988: 47). Using God's three kinds of knowledge, Molinists explain how meticulous providence doesn't eliminate creaturely freedom.[5] Here's a rough sketch of what God's process of choosing a world for actualization looks like on Molinism.[6]

First, God's natural knowledge informs him of all the logically possible worlds available for actualization. God deliberates and decides if he wants to bring into existence contingent beings, and if so, whether or not those contingent beings will be rational, moral, free, etc. Then, God decides to create human beings that are both rational and moral, and as Molinists argue, free in the libertarian sense. In his middle knowledge, God knows the true CFs and the available worlds for him to actualize. Because the CFs are independent of God's will, some logically possible worlds are outside of his power to bring

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[5]Molinists deny that there's a temporal succession in God's knowledge because, whatever God knows, he knows from eternity; however, as Craig explains, 'there does exist a sort of logical succession in God's knowledge in that His knowledge of certain propositions is conditionally or explanatorily prior to His knowledge of certain other propositions' (Craig 1991: 237).

[6]Of course, the deliberation undertaken by God is at best metaphorical or analogical, for an omniscient God has no need for discursive reasoning and deliberation, perhaps God immediately and intuitively grasps all available options and knows the best way to proceed.

about; the subset of logically possible worlds that are actualizable are called *feasible* worlds. Finally, using middle knowledge to sort through the worlds and choose one that he deems best (or acceptable), God freely actualizes that feasible world.

Before proceeding, I wish to emphasize that Molinism entails a limitation on God's creative options precisely because the true CFs delimit the range of possible worlds available to God from which to choose. This entailment is widely recognized and accepted even by Molinists (Craig 1988: 274; Freddoso 1988: 50; Hasker 1992; Flint 1998: 48: 103; Leftow 2005b; Langtry 2008: 31: 270; Wierenga 2011: 137; Zimmerman 2011: 174). For example, if the CF *if Putin were in C, then he would freely invade Ukraine* is true, then if God puts Putin in *C*, it's not even within God's power to make the consequent of the counterfactual false. Of course, God could refrain from putting Putin in *C*, but God cannot actualize a world in which Putin is in *C* and Putin freely refrains from invading Ukraine. There are an infinite number of such true CFs, and the set of true CFs restricts God's options. Following Flint, I'll refer to the set of true CFs as a *creaturely world-type* (Flint 1998: 48). Furthermore, there's a set of possible worlds in which a creaturely world-type is true, which Flint calls a *galaxy*, and a world is feasible 'just in case it is a member of the galaxy determined by the true creaturely world-type; a world that is not a member of that galaxy would be *infeasible* for God' (ibid: 51).[7] Since God lacks control over which creaturely world-type is true and since every creaturely world-type determines which galaxy is true, God lacks control over which worlds are feasible, i.e., candidates for actualization. So, if God has middle knowledge, then there are many logically possible worlds that God cannot actualize. In other words, it is metaphysically impossible for God to actualize an infeasible world. This entailment appears indisputable.

Understandably, Molinists are quick to point out that God's limitation vis-à-vis the true CFs is unproblematic: it doesn't diminish his omnipotence (Craig 1988: 274) nor does it take away from his sovereign control over creation (Flint 1998: 49–50). Still, even if worries about God's relation to the CFs and the worlds they make available for God to choose could be alleviated, next, I'll argue that there are more pressing problems lurking around the corner having to do with exposure to circumstantial luck.

IV. Divine circumstantial luck

To say something about divine moral luck is to say something directly about God's moral responsibility, praiseworthiness, or blameworthiness, in basic

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[7]Additionally, that some world or galaxy is feasible or infeasible is itself a contingent truth (Flint 1998: 54).

desert sense.[8] Some might reject the view that God is a moral agent. However, I don't mean that God has moral duties and obligations, but only the minimal claim that God's actions can be evaluated in moral terms, the kind of terms that we use to assess the actions of others, e.g. when we say that volunteering at the homeless shelter was a *good* act. Now, someone might worry that it makes no sense to morally appraise God's actions, e.g. because his very nature is the standard of goodness, and thus there's no higher standard to which we can appeal in our assessment. Nonetheless, I think George Schlesinger made a reasonable point on this issue: it's permissible to apply human moral standards to evaluate God's conduct because 'we have no other notions of good and bad except those appertaining to human situations' and thus either we're allowed 'to use the only moral notions we have, or we cannot say anything meaningful on the subject' (Schlesinger 1964: 244). As we advance, I will assume that we can use terms like 'good' in reference to divine actions, even if the usage is only analogous and not univocal. After all, I take it that most theists think they *are* saying something meaningful when they ascribe, for example, goodness to God's actions and praise him for his good works.

Here, I'll focus on divine praiseworthiness rather than blameworthiness for a simple reason: Molinists endorse that standard view of God according to which God cannot act wrongly and thus cannot be blameworthy. God is essentially morally perfect, and thus anything he does will be good and right; since God never performs wrong actions, God will never be deserving of blame (Ekstrom 2021: 146). Therefore, the following discussion will concentrate on divine moral responsibility and praiseworthiness.

Relatively uncontroversial is the view that God deserves praise. Scripture's imperatives are clear: God is to be praised (e.g. Psalm 106:1; 150:6). The notion of divine praiseworthiness is typically understood in these two ways: God deserves praise for who he is, and God deserves praise for what he does. For example, theists praise God for being gracious, loving, merciful, almighty, etc. They also praise God for answering their prayers, meeting their needs, and forgiving their sins. The kind of praiseworthiness I'm after concerns only divine actions. Roughly, we can think of actions being 'good' in the following way: an action is good, at least in part, if it derives its goodness from bringing about a state of affairs that is itself good. If a good state of affairs is obtained as the result of an agent's action, then that action was good. So, if God's healing of a deaf person is a good state of affairs, then the divine act of healing was itself good.

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[8]Someone might object that basic desert responsibility doesn't apply to God. I think my argument still works because we can use other accounts of responsibility. However, I think my argument can be successful even if, strictly speaking, God is not praiseworthy in the moral or basic desert sense (e.g. if he has no moral duties to fulfill) but praiseworthy in some other sense (Pereboom 2009); for instance, God might be *metaphysically* praiseworthy (Senor 2008).

Importantly, praise comes in degrees. If Thor saves three drowning children while Iron Man saves only one, *ceteris paribus*, Thor deserves more praise than Iron Man, although both are praiseworthy. Plausibly, this reasoning also applies to God. Suppose that a divine action A brings about 100 units of goodness and action B 1000 units of goodness; even though both actions are good, *ceteris paribus*, action B is better precisely because it actualizes a better state of affairs than action A.[9] Accordingly, it's reasonable to think that God deserves more praise for action B than for action A. Lastly, although non-moral praise is appropriate in certain contexts, such as when we praise an athlete for an incredible performance, I will focus here exclusively on moral praise.

With these preliminaries out of the way, we can advance to the main arguments. In cases of divine moral luck, we treat God as an object of moral judgment, even though what he's assessed for, whether that be his constitution, circumstances, or results of actions, at least in part depends on a state of affairs that's beyond his control. Accordingly, we can define divine moral luck as follows:

> Divine Moral Luck: Divine moral luck occurs when state of affairs beyond God's control affect God's moral standing, i.e. the degree of responsibility and praise he justifiably deserves.

Also, I wish to clarify that my argument will not be that subjection to moral luck eliminates responsibility and control. Plausibly, not all luck upstream of actions eradicates agential responsibility for those actions. Suppose Anna is a world-class chef. She was born with certain qualities and dispositions that helped her attain, through hard work and much training, a level of cooking that is rivaled only by Gordon Ramsey himself. When Anna makes her family a mouth-watering Thanksgiving meal, although luck played a role in her constitution, circumstances, etc., it would be erroneous to claim that she lacks control over (and is not responsible for) the state of affairs *having cooked her family an otherworldly meal*. Surely, Anna exercises enough control to be responsible; indeed, she's to be praised for her culinary expertise. In short, not everything that's made possible by a lucky event or state of affairs is itself lucky (Levy 2009: 294; Peels 2015: 79).[10] With these provisos out of the way, next, I make the case that the Molinist God is subject to circumstantial moral luck.

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[9]I admit that talking about 'units' of goodness might be misguided here. Perhaps a better approach would be to say that actions are good relative to some standard, such as a standard for actions; actions that approximate the standard are good, and the closer that action's approximation to the standard, the better the action. But talk of divine actions approximating to a standard of goodness is likewise problematic (perhaps unless we posit that the standard of goodness is God himself). Thus, I wish to simplify things by stipulating that goodness could be measured in units. My usage of units takes inspiration from Plantinga's reference to 'turps' and 'felics' as units of evil and goodness, respectively (Plantinga 1979).

[10]There is a bigger debate here about whether luck in general is compatible with moral responsibility and control, but this is a debate I don't intend to wade into here.

To see how this kind of luck enters the picture, let's consider the possibilities the true CFs could've presented God before he decided to create. Bruce Langtry identifies three logical possibilities, which I modify slightly and adopt here. Scenario 1: The true CFs are such that God can actualize a *broad* range of overall acceptable worlds; Scenario 2: The true CFs are such that God can actualize a *narrow* range of overall acceptable worlds; Scenario 3: The true CFs are such that there are *no* overall acceptable worlds (Langtry 2008: 33).

To simplify things, let's combine the first two scenarios and call them *Some Acceptable Words*, and the third scenario *No Acceptable Worlds*. For my purpose here, we don't need to specify conditions that would make a world acceptable for God to actualize, but any world that God chooses to actualize must be consistent with his perfect goodness and rationality. So, for example, worlds in which all creatures suffer pointlessly and endlessly are not candidates for actualization. Now, logically, prior to the creative decree, any of the scenarios could have been obtained—the circumstance in which God 'finds' which worlds are live options for actualization is entirely beyond his control. The most interesting scenario to reflect on that I could've obtained is *No Acceptable Words* (this is Langtry's third scenario), and I do so next.

Here's one version of *No Acceptable Worlds*. Following Plantinga's Free Will Defense, Molinists generally think that a world containing moral good but no moral evil is a logically possible state of affairs, but such a world is infeasible for God to actualize. Given the creaturely world-types that could have been true, possibly, every human would freely perform at least one evil action, fall into sin, and become in need of salvation.[11] This is the controversial thesis of transworld depravity (TWD), the doctrine that possibly every creaturely essence, if instantiated, would freely go wrong with respect to some moral action (Plantinga 1974: 48). But then, the same reasoning seems to lead to the logical possibility of utter-TWD, the thesis that possibly every creaturely essence, if instantiated, always would freely go wrong with respect to every moral action.[12] Again, because God lacks control over the truth value of the creaturely world-types, unless we have a defeater to think that utter-TWD is logically impossible, for all we know, such a scenario could have been obtained.[13] This implication of Molinism provides good reasons to think that the Molinist God is exposed to luck, specifically, circumstantial luck.

[11] Shortly after Plantinga's work on the Free Will Defense was published, philosophers were quick to point out that, in Plantinga's view, God was dependent on luck to bring about a favorable balance of morally right actions over morally wrong actions (e.g. see Windt's 1973 article 'Plantinga's Unfortunate God.')

[12] Hasker points to another possibility: transworld *damnation*, according to which all creatures freely reject God's grace and are lost (Hasker 1991: 381).

[13] The logical possibility of such a scenario is compatible with thinking that such a scenario is implausible. While there are serious objections to TWD, either because the thesis is highly implausible or even necessarily false but given that Molinists accept these scenarios, I have no need to enter the debate about whether these scenarios are logically possible.

First, it's a matter of circumstantial luck that *No Acceptable Worlds* fails to obtain. God is lucky that the CFs allowed him to actualize an overall acceptable world (Langtry 2008; Hartman 2014: 85:30). This is assuming, of course, that the actual world is overall acceptable. Had *No Acceptable Worlds* obtained, e.g. if utter-TWD infected all possible free creatures, God would be unable to actualize a world like ours—containing free creatures that sometimes act rightly; thus, it also seems a matter of circumstantial luck that God is able to create free creatures at all. Edward Wierenga notes this disquieting possibility:

> What if every possible free creature would, if created, perform so much evil that it would be better that God not create that creature? That seems like a possibility. And if it were actual, God would be unable to create free creatures, since necessarily he does not create creatures it would be better not to create. (Wierenga 2011: 137)[14]

At this point, it would be beneficial to discuss at which logical moment in his creative deliberation God chooses a specific world to actualize. The strength of our intuitions about the luckiness of God on Molinism will vary depending on the exact logical moment that God formulates a plan for history that would accomplish his interests, desires, purposes, etc. Here's the question: Does God have an idea of the ideal world he would desire to actualize if he faced no constraints? Plausibly, God does have such an idea. But here's the rub: given God's lack of control over which CFs are true, if there happened to be a feasible world that matched his ideal world, then this match would be, as one critic of Molinism puts it, a 'lucky accident' (Highfield 2011:119). Why think that?

> [T]hat there happens to be a feasible [world] that conforms to God's ideal does not demonstrate God's 'breathtaking sovereignty' but his good fortune... the very availability of a feasible world that conforms to God's ideal will, or even of a feasible world in which good outweighs evil, is a lucky accident brought about by the fortuitous intersection of the set of feasible worlds and the set of worlds acceptable to God as candidates for actualization. (Highfield 2011: 119,121)

How does God choose which world to actualize? There are two options here: either God first has an ideal world in mind and then discovers that the CFs allow for such a world, or God first examines the feasible worlds available to him and only then formulates a plan and chooses a feasible world accordingly. Steven Cowan (2009a) helpfully frames the two ways that Molinists could order God's deliberation. According to *Scheme A*, the ordering is thus:

(A1) God formulates a plan for how he wants the history of the world to go, then

(A2) He 'looks' at the set of true CFs to see which possible worlds are actualizable, and then

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[14]For a similar argument, see Zimmerman (2011).

(A3) Discovers that there is an actualizable world that corresponds to his initial plan, and then

(A4) He creates that possible world.

On this model, God's plan is logically prior to his 'discovery' of the true CFs. Of course, it should be evident that this scheme entails that God would be very lucky indeed. But, as Cowan points out, most, if not all, Molinists will reject *Scheme A* in favor of *Scheme B*:

(B1) God 'looks' at the set of true CFs to see which possible worlds are actualizable, and then

(B2) He formulates a plan for how he would like the history of the world to go by choosing that actualizable world which, all things considered, seems best to him, and then

(B3) He creates that actualizable world.

This model represents the ordering typically offered by Molinists. Yes, God has a plan for all of history, but this plan depends on which CFs are true: had the CFs presented other options for actualization, God could've had a different plan.[15] But even in this scheme, Cowan argues, God cannot avoid being lucky. This is because of the possibility that every feasible world suffers from *inherent irredeemability*, which is another version of the *No Acceptable Worlds* scenario; long story short, Cowan concludes that '*if, on Scheme-B Molinism, there is an actualizable world in which God is an actor and that contains more overall good than evil, it is a matter of luck*' (Cowan 2009a: 168, italics original).[16]

In his reply to Cowan, Scott Davison grants that on *Scheme A*, God would be 'monumentally lucky' (Davison 2009: 170). Regarding *Scheme B*, Davison again grants that *if* the extreme scenarios of nearly every possible creature going right (or wrong) with respect to nearly every possible libertarian choice obtained, it would make sense to describe God as lucky (or unlucky), but,

> if neither one of these combinations were to obtain, and some other combination in between were to obtain instead, then it would be hard to know what to say. It would not seem to make sense to describe God as being either lucky or unlucky in that case. (Davison 2009: 173-74)

I find this response puzzling, for it seems that whatever makes God lucky or unlucky in the extreme scenarios is the same thing that makes attributions of luck sensical in the non-extreme scenarios; in both scenarios, God is lucky

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[15]This scheme preserves divine perfect rationality, for God intends to actualize only the world that he knows the true CFs will permit him to actualize (Leftow 2005b: 283).

[16]Davison (2009) identified a problem with Cowan's conclusion, and it's that the conclusion fails to consider that God could have refrained from creating creatures with libertarian freedom at all. Accordingly, Cowan is forced to revise his contention: '*if, on Scheme-B Molinism, there is an actualizable world in which God is an actor and that contains both libertarianly free creatures more overall good than evil, it is a matter of luck*' (Cowan 2009b: 180, italics original).

because all conditions on luck—whatever they might be—are satisfied. Sure, perhaps in the absence of the extreme scenarios obtained, we couldn't attribute wholly bad luck or good luck (because the non-extreme scenarios could contain some bad luck and some good luck) to God—in other words, perhaps we couldn't say whether God was lucky *simpliciter* or unlucky *simpliciter*. Still, the fact of God's subjection to luck remains intact.

Now, suppose that Davison's non-extreme scenario obtains: the true CFs neither point to all creatures freely always going right with respect to an action nor all creatures freely always going wrong with respect to an action (this is the *No Acceptable Worlds* scenario). Instead, God finds himself somewhere between the two extremes, i.e., in *Some Acceptable Worlds*. Still, even in this scenario, God experiences circumstantial luck because the way the CFs turned out was beyond God's control. Therefore, contrary to Davison, it makes perfect sense to say that the obtaining of *Some Acceptable Worlds* is circumstantially lucky for God. I suggest that the difference between the extreme and non-extreme scenarios has to do not with whether God is subject to luck but rather with *how much* luck God is exposed to: on *No Acceptable Worlds*, lots of luck; on *Some Acceptable Worlds*, at least *some* luck.

Does God's subjection to circumstantial moral luck present a problem for Molinists? I think so, as I'll explain in the next section. At the very least, I wish to convince Molinists that they should take charge of God's subjection to luck as a serious matter worthy of further investigation.

V. Some worries

I wish to emphasize that my argument will not be that God's *goodness* increases or decreases depending on which world is actualized. Two agents can perform the same kind of action, but due to circumstances external to the agents—such as the circumstances in which those actions are made possible—the consequences of those actions could result in one action being morally better than the other; so, one agent has a better moral record, but this does not imply, at least not obviously, that one agent is morally better than the other (Leftow 2005a). Suppose Jack and Jill decide to donate $1000 to charity, and while Jack successfully does so, for reasons beyond Jill's control, the money never makes it to the charity; both agents are morally on par, all else being equal, yet Jack's actions bring about more good, and thus Jack deserves more praise.[17] Someone could object that Jack does *not* deserve more praise, given that his and Jill's intentions and character are the same, but this is just to deny that moral luck exists.[18] In summary, God's praiseworthiness (but not his

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[17] This example is from Leftow (2005a).
[18] For a good argument that this response to moral luck doesn't work, see Hartman (2020).

goodness) on Molinism varies from world to world depending on the true CFs and his creative circumstances; thus, he's circumstantially morally lucky.[19]

First, the worry with divine circumstantial moral luck is this: God's subjection to bad circumstantial luck might present a challenge to God's moral perfection. Shawn Graves argues that a necessary condition for moral perfection, among others, is this: S never brings about or knowingly and intentionally allows any intrinsically bad state (Graves 2014: 137). So, an agent is morally perfect only if she satisfies this condition. But, Graves claims, 'moral agents sometimes find themselves in situations in which it is necessary to do a regrettable thing in order to do what is morally right,' such as cases 'involving agents that bring about or knowingly and intentionally allow pain and suffering' (ibid: 131). So, due to circumstantial bad luck, the agent brings about or allows a bad state of affairs and this affects her moral resume because although she might not be blameworthy and does what's morally required in those regrettable circumstances, her moral resume could be improved: it could lack the instance of bringing about or allowing a bad state of affairs. But perfection cannot be improved. Therefore, Graves states, 'circumstances can ruin perfection' (ibid: 135). He then applies his reasoning to God and concludes that God is not morally perfect. Although Graves' argument is directed broadly toward all models of God on which God is conceived as morally perfect, it should be clear how his argument serves my purpose here of putting pressure on Molinists. However, I don't wish to develop this argument further and so I move on to the second worry, which strikes me as more plausible than Graves' argument.

To uncover the second problem with divine circumstantial luck for Molinism, let's compare three creative scenarios God could've faced given the true CFs that focus on the number of people saved or damned. First, the CFs could be such that all worlds are salvifically bad (e.g. where a handful are saved and billions damned). Second, the CFs could be such that all worlds are salvifically good (e.g. where most or many or more than half are saved).[20] Thirdly, the CFs could be such that there's a salvifically optimal world, i.e., a world in which the balance between the saved and damned is optimal and cannot be improved upon without undesirable consequences.[21] Since it's beyond God's control which CFs turn out to be true, they at least in part determine just how much salvific goodness God brings about by actualizing a world. Moreover, God is circumstantially morally lucky that the CFs allowed him to actualize a salvifically good world at all.

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[19]This conclusion has been identified before: Leftow (2005b: 270).

[20]Here, I assume that possible worlds are commensurate with one another with respect to their overall goodness.

[21]For an argument that given some plausible principles of rationality and certain assumptions that Molinists already accept, God's perfect rationality necessarily would lead him to actualize a salvifically optimal world, see Rusavuk (2019).

Plausibly, the amount of praise God deserves in the obtainment of a certain salvifically good world will in part be determined by which worlds are available for him to actualize and how much salvific goodness those worlds contain. If that's the case, then luck will affect God's moral standing by affecting the degree of his praiseworthiness. If, in one scenario, the CFs beyond God's control allow him to actualize a salvifically good world, and in another scenario, a salvifically optimal world, and if God is more praiseworthy in the latter scenario, then luck has made a difference.[22] Suppose you commit to donating 10% of your lottery winnings. Lo and behold, you win a thousand dollars and donate the promised sum to charity. You're praiseworthy for this act. But had you won a billion dollars and still kept your word, it's intuitive to think that you'd be even *more* praiseworthy. Similarly, it seems intuitive to think that God deserves more praise for better outcomes. In the argument below, I generalize my line of reasoning by focusing on goodness *simpliciter* (and not just salvific goodness) that God brings about.

Molinists typically subscribe to perfect being theism, according to which God is the sole possessor of the greatest set of compatible perfections (i.e. great-making properties) and he has them to an unlimited or highest degree possible. On standard perfect being theism, if God fails to possess perfection to the maximum degree, *ceteris paribus*, it's possible that a being greater than God exists, i.e., a being who has more of that perfection.[23] On this exalted view of the divine, since praiseworthiness is a perfection, it seems that God must be maximally praiseworthy, i.e., unsurpassable in praiseworthiness in every possible world. The line of reasoning in favor of this assumption goes like this: 'maximal perfection seems to entail maximal praiseworthiness. If God is not maximally praiseworthy, then we can conceive of a greater being, one who is maximally praiseworthy' (Rogers 1993: 443). So, no being, actual or possible, could be more praiseworthy than God. Someone could object that a divine perfection could trade off with other perfections such that, as long as the being is *overall* unsurpassable in greatness, a *particular* perfection like praiseworthiness need not be maximally realized. I think there are serious problems with such tradeoffs (*à la* Murphy 2017: 15), but instead of entering the debate here, I will simply assume both that God must be maximally praiseworthy and that Molinists will not object to my assumption.[24] But as we've seen, subjection to circumstantial luck at the moment of God's creative decree entails that the

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[22]Furthermore, if there is a best possible world (or one of best possible) and God is able to actualize that world, again, God would be extremely lucky indeed.

[23]Some perfect being theists deny this requirement, e.g. Nagasawa (2017).

[24]If maximal praiseworthiness can be shown to be internally incoherent or incompatible with other perfections, then my argument would have implications for non-Molinist views as well.

amount of goodness that will be actualized fluctuates across worlds and as a result, so does divine praiseworthiness. Let's begin with this argument:

(1) God is subject to circumstantial moral luck.
(2) If God is subject to circumstantial moral luck, then the amount of goodness he brings about varies from world to world.
(3) If the amount of goodness he brings about varies from world to world, then God's praiseworthiness also varies from world to world.
(4) So, God's praiseworthiness varies from world to world.

This means that God could be praiseworthy to degree n in one world, degree $n + 100$ in another world, degree $n + 1000$ in a third, and so on, depending on the set of all true CFs.

In this regard, praiseworthiness differs from those perfections that remain stable across worlds, e.g. God's goodness or rationality. On the Molinist picture, what determines the degree to which God is praiseworthy in a world populated with free creatures? Circumstantial moral luck. Now the problem comes into focus: On Molinism, something *external* to God and beyond his control determines the degree of his praiseworthiness: it's not up to God to what level this perfection is realized in a world. Circumstantial luck via the true CFs sets the upper limit of God's praiseworthiness across worlds, and this limitation is neither self-imposed nor arising from God's nature.

The Molinist might be tempted to reply as follows: it's still possible that in the actual world, God is maximally praiseworthy, even if in other worlds he is not. This is a bad reply. First, this response implies that it's possible for God to be surpassed in praiseworthiness by other beings in other worlds; thus, God is not essentially maximally praiseworthy. This is incompatible with perfect being theism. Second, if God is indeed maximally praiseworthy only in the actual world, this too is a stroke of colossal good luck and determined by something external to him. Molinists might decide to bite this bullet but bullets this large tend to come with an unpleasant side effect of decreasing that theory's plausibility (not to mention tastiness).

Here's a stronger Molinist reply to my argument: it's possible that God is maximally praiseworthy in *every* world because given the true CFs, God *is as praiseworthy as he could be* in that world given the circumstances. For instance, suppose in the actual world God is praiseworthy to degree n, but if he had better circumstantial luck, he would've been praiseworthy to degree $n + 100$. Either way, God does the best he can, given the hand he's been dealt, and thus there's no deficiency in God. Perhaps when we dissect divine praiseworthiness, we need to understand it as encompassing God's actions *given all the relevant circumstances* (such as which CFs are true). On this picture, subjection to circumstantial luck is already factored in the final analysis of divine praiseworthiness.

I have a few replies to this line of reasoning. First, suppose the CFs turned out such that the amount of praise God deserved in that world was very low. According to the reply under consideration, God would still count as maximally praiseworthy and in fact, he would still qualify as maximally praiseworthy even if, in *every* relevant world, God's praiseworthiness was very low. This seems odd for the following reason. It's been argued that divine perfections must be 'sufficiently valuable' (Murphy 2017: 16) and that to qualify as God, it's not enough to be the best actual (or even the best possible) being: the being must be *sufficiently* great (ibid; cf. Speaks 2018: 123). If this reasoning is correct, then 'maximal' praiseworthiness that failed to reach a sufficiently high degree in all worlds would not be worthy of the name. Compare: it would be strange to call Zod maximally courageous if (1) Zod performed only three courageous actions in every world and (2) no other beings performed more courageous actions than Zod. We would want maximal courage to be realized in a sufficiently valuable way, although it might be difficult to determine the threshold that maximal courage or praiseworthiness satisfies this criterion. And so, the lesson here is this: the mere fact that God is not surpassable in praiseworthiness doesn't entail that he's sufficiently praiseworthy.[25] Again, this is because for any perfection, 'it is impossible to realize that [perfection] more valuably than it is realized in the absolutely perfect being' (Murphy 2018: 11).

Second, just because something is *necessarily* outside of God's control (like how much praise he deserves in a given world due to his exposure to luck) doesn't mean it's unproblematic. Consider: if abstract objects exist necessarily, then plausibly their existence and constitution are beyond God's control, but many theists (including leading Molinists) who affirm the doctrine of aseity *do* think this is problematic. In the same way, the admission that God is necessarily exposed to luck that diminishes praiseworthiness doesn't mean this result is only trivial and inconsequential, and so Molinists shouldn't be so quick to rely on this line of defense.

The final thing I want to say is that this response doesn't address the main problem, which is that factors external to God's nature have a direct bearing on the level of praiseworthiness that is exemplified in a given world. Forces outside of God set the upper limits of praiseworthiness. In fact, as we've seen, the Molinist God might have not been able to create a good world with free creatures at all, which means that whether or not God is praiseworthy to *any* degree at all for his actions is a matter of luck. All of this seems in tension with perfect being theism and so, circumstantial luck gifts Molinists a serious wrinkle to iron out.

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[25]This might not be a problem merely for Molinists but for all perfect being theists.

VI. Conclusion

I've argued in this paper that Molinism's adherence to CFs that are be-
yond God's control entails the presence of circumstantial luck. Furthermore,
I've argued that exposure to luck raises the theoretical costs of Molinism
and thus diminishes its appeal. My arguments don't show that Molinism
is false, nor did it intend them to do so. Still, even if subjection to luck
doesn't entail incompatibility with perfect being theism, it leads to tricky
problems that have to do with external limitations on divine praiseworthi-
ness and whether divine praiseworthiness is realized to any degree what-
soever in a world with free creatures. I think this conclusion reveals some
previously hidden costs of Molinism. Molinism prides itself on possessing
great explanatory power regarding a wide range of theological data and
the ability to reconcile certain tensions (e.g. the compatibility of meticulous
providence and human freedom, unconditional election, the fate of the un-
saved, etc.). Thus, if the Molinist story is shot through with circumstantial
luck and this affects divine praiseworthiness in the way I've argued that it
does, the costs of subscribing to Molinism appear steep. In the end, I in-
vite others to explore further the issues raised in this paper. For now, the
kryptonite of luck remains a potent problem for the Molinist conception of
God.[26]

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