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God, Middle Knowledge and Alternative Worlds

Mr Cook, who wrote on 'Søren Kierkegaard: Missionary to Christendom' in EQ 87:4, 1987, 311-27, is presently engaged on research into the concept of divine foreknowledge. He has also contributed an essay on 'Divine Foreknowledge: Some Philosophical Issues' in Vox Evangelica 20, 1990, 57-72.

This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favourable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost. (From The Garden of Forking Paths by J. L. Borges)

I. Introduction

Today's evangelical scholars are justifiably perplexed over the issue of divine foreknowledge. On the one hand Christian tradition and the Bible itself seem to affirm clearly that all future events are known to God whereas eminent contemporary Christian philosophers like R. Swinburne are denying it and even an evangelical spokesman of the calibre of C. Pinnock has openly agreed with this negative view. The debate continues, then, between traditionalists who are convinced that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future¹ and those who maintain that God only knows the future insofar as he determines it (e.g. he knows that the *parousia* will occur) and can fallibly predict it from trends.²

¹ E.g. B. Davies, P. Helm, and B. Reichenbach whose debate with C. Pinnock may be found in: D. & R. Basinger eds., *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, 1986).

² E.g. R. E. Creel, P. Geach, B. Hebblethwaite, J. R. Lucas and K. Ward.

However, there is an interesting third party in the fray. Centred in America, a small but influential group of Christian philosophers are asserting neither that God only knows what could happen (that is, the range of possibilities and probabilities) [limited foreknowledge], nor that he is merely cognizant of what will happen [simple foreknowledge], but rather that he is also aware of what specifically would happen in hypothetical circumstances involving free, and therefore unpredictable beings. This concept of prescience is known historically as Middle Knowledge.

This review article will provide an historical sketch of the key moments in the recurrence of this little known view, a discussion of its alleged theological merits, and an outline presentation of some of the main arguments in the current debate as to its philosophical viability.

II. Background and Context of the Modern Debate

1. Molina

Dissatisfied with the implicit determinism of Thomism and the explicit determinism of the Reformers, Luis Molina developed a novel theological system which he thought could preserve both divine sovereignty and significant (libertarian) human freedom. In agreement with contemporary orthodoxy, the Spanish Jesuit taught in his *Concordia* (1588) that God enjoys *scientia simplicis intelligentiæ*, that is knowledge of all that is possible including every contingent state of affairs that could be actualized in a created world (for example, in no possible world could a man's blood brother be an only child since the necessary truths of the laws of logic forbid it) and that God also possesses *scientia visionis*, which includes knowledge of the actual future of the universe that he has chosen to create. But between (or 'in the middle of') these two kinds of knowledge, Molina believed there is *scientia media*, of Middle Knowledge:

by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each free will, [God] saw in His own essence what each such will would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or that or indeed in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.³

Thus God has knowledge of *futuribilia* (states that would obtain

³ *Concordia* 4. 52. 9 (trans. A. J. Freddoso). Quoted from: W. L. Craig, *The Problem of divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden, 1988), 175.

in hypothetical universes), and on the basis of this knowledge he choose to bring into being this specific universe. Molina taught that Middle Knowledge is a necessary aspect of God's omniscience but its actual content is contingent since the creatures which are the objects of this knowledge could make different choices under identical circumstances. This knowledge is not acquired empirically through the observation of potential worlds but rather is innate to God as indeed is his *scientia visionis*.

The *Concordia* cause an immediate furore with the Dominicans accusing the Molinists of being anti-Thomist and anti-Trent. While the opposition branded the Dominicans as 'Calvinists', they in turn were dubbed 'Pelagians'! Molina died as he awaited what seemed to be imminent condemnation, leaving his cause to be argued by a fellow Spanish Jesuit, Francisco Suarez.

2. Suarez

A modified version of Middle Knowledge was presented in Suarez's two *Opuscula* (1594-97). As an able apologist he sought to demonstrate that Molina's views were not pure innovation; for example, he pointed out that Augustine had argued that some persons die in infancy because God knows that they would have fallen from the faith in adult life had they lived. Suarez mainly endorsed Molina's system but he did dissent over one significant point which has become an important issue in the modern discussion. For Molina, Middle Knowledge is possible in virtue of God's 'supercomprehension' of creaturely will so that he can so thoroughly understand it that he is able to discern how it will freely choose in any circumstance, while for Suarez, God's Middle Knowledge is founded on the fact that propositions about hypothetical creaturely choices have a truth-value (i.e. they are either true or false) and God, being omniscient, knows what their truth-value is.⁴

After a decade of acrimony, the pope finally intervened, declaring that hostilities must cease and Molinism be accepted alongside Thomism as an officially permitted option.⁵

⁴ A useful discussion of the teachings of Molina and Suarez is to be found in W. L. Craig's chapter 'Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?' in: C. H. Pinnock ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* (Grand Rapids, 1989).

⁵ In his book, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, 1983), R. H. Nash offers a useful summary of the debate but he is misleading when he writes, 'Roman Catholic theology quickly decided that Molina's attempt to preserve free will was heretical' (64).

3. Leibniz

In his *Essais de Théodicée* (1710), Gottfried Leibniz summarizes Molina's work and explicitly accepts the concept of *futuribiles* which he calls 'conditional futures'. God is conceived to possess infallible knowledge of all possible worlds, that is all possible cosmic histories down to their last detail. He then decides to bring into being that universe which contains the greatest possible amount of perfection and this cosmos one may call 'the best of all possible worlds'.

At first sight, Leibniz's assertion may seem strikingly naive given the blatant evils present in our world, and indeed Voltaire in his *Candide* was not the only writer to make comic capital out of his position (who was it that wrote 'The optimist proclaims that we live in the best possible world; and the pessimist fears that this is so?'). However, Leibniz's case is more subtle, stressing as he does the inevitable constraints operating on God. For instance, it is logically impossible for God to create another God and therefore any creature will be finite and thus imperfect. Moreover, being limited in knowledge this creature will be prone to make mistakes. Yet a universe of sinless automata would be a less valuable world still. Kalakowski describes the divine task as follows:

God had to solve, as it were, a fairly complicated differential equation (in fact an infinite equation) to calculate in which among all possible worlds the amount of evil would be smallest compared to the amount of good; and that is the world we live in.⁶

Nevertheless Leibniz was convinced that this is a splendid universe. He ends his book with an allegory: Pallas Athene, goddess of wisdom, conducts Theodorus through a pyramid shaped building consisting of a number of halls, each of which represents a possible world. At the apex of the structure they reach the room which Jupiter had chosen to be the real world; it is so beautiful that Theodorus falls into a swoon.

4. Plantinga

It seems that the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga devised his notion of what might be called Middle Knowledge independently of Molina. In an autobiographical note, he describes a meeting in 1973 at which he presented his theodicy which took for granted that there are counterfactuals (propositions which are

⁶ L. Kolakowski, *Religion* (Glasgow, 1982), 20.

contrary-to-fact and therefore describe hypothetical situations) of freedom and that God knows what their truth-values are, meaning that he knows whether they are true or false. During the discussion time, A. Kenny dubbed him a Molinist and Plantinga confesses, 'I wasn't sure whether that was commendation or condemnation!'⁷

Plantinga relies heavily on modal logic with its possible world semantics. He describes himself as a modal realist, by which he means someone who contends that there are possible worlds. He explains: 'A possible world . . . like a property, proposition or set, is an *abstract* object: an object that (like God) is immaterial, but (unlike God) is essentially incapable of life, activity or casual relationship's.⁸ It is 'a *way things could have been*; it is a *state of affairs* of some kind'⁹ and just as some propositions are true and others false, so some states of affairs are actual and other potential; however the potential, like false propositions, nevertheless exist. Thus, strictly speaking, God does not bring possible worlds into existence, he does not create them, but he knows them and he may actualize one of them as indeed he has done with the particular world we find ourselves in.

5. Multiple Worlds in the New Physics

The contemporary interest in alternative universes reflected in the subject matter of so many science fiction novels¹⁰ is, however, the result not so much of philosophical enquiry as of the speculations of certain well respected scientists. J. A. Wheeler, for example, has offered his Many Universes theory as a reply to the so called *Anthropic Principle* which presents the cosmos as somehow constructed so that life must inevitably evolve. The Principle demonstrates just how 'finely tuned' the universe is, such that if the fundamental constants of nature had been calibrated slightly differently, there would have been no cosmos at all, much less one that produced life. In response to the conclusion that our intricately ordered universe cannot be the product of chance, Wheeler has suggested that there are multitudes of universes of varying degrees of order and it is obviously no coincidence that we happen to be in the one that is able to support life!

⁷ J. Tomberlin & P. Van Inwagen eds., *Alvin Plantinga. Profiles 5* (Dordrecht, 1985), 50.

⁸ *Ibid.* 88.

⁹ A. C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, 1974), 34.

¹⁰ E.g. G. Benford, *Timescape* (London, 1980).

Moving from the macro to the microcosm, in 1957 H. Everett put forward his theory of Parallel Universes to explain one of the many enigmas associated with quantum physics. Evidently, quantum reality consists of a phantom world of unresolved force-fields which collapse into discrete particles once they are observed in the laboratory. As well as the mystery of how the act of observation can affect reality, there is the puzzle of why this ghostly wave field resolves into just this particle in this particular location. Everett suggests that it is so positioned in our universe but in fact there are parallel universes where all the other possible locations are represented. In fact at every such quantum event the universe actually bifurcates and, as P. Davies explains, 'When the universe splits, our minds split with it, one copy going off to populate each world. Each copy thinks it is unique'.¹¹ That we do not feel it happening is no more a counter argument, says Davies, than is the argument that the earth must be stationary since we do not feel it moving (one also wonders whether amoebas miss themselves once they have split apart!). But where are these parallel universes? Those that closely resemble our own are nearby; yet inaccessible, 'The reader . . . is no more than an inch away from millions of his duplicates, but that inch is not measured through the space of our perceptions'.¹²

Now, of course, these worlds are different from the possible worlds discussed by philosophers since the universes of Wheeler and Everett are actual. However there are modal logicians who come very close to this position. For example, D. Lewis considers the way we demarcate our world as uniquely 'actual':

We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by 'actual' what we do . . . 'Actual' is indexical, like 'I' or 'here', or 'now': it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located.¹³

6. *Alternative Worlds in Precognition*

Parapsychologists have on record numerous reports of subjects foreseeing certain events and *a fortiori*, this evidence must be of relevance to the debate over whether it is sensible to speak of

¹¹ P. Davies, *God and the New Physics* (London, 1983), 116.

¹² *Ibid.* 117.

¹³ D. Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford, 1986 [first printed 1973]), 85–86.

divine foreknowledge. What is less obvious is that the psychical research of the past hundred years or so may be interpreted to lend weight to the possibility of Middle Knowledge since many of the subjects are warned by the premonition and alter their behaviour accordingly. To take one example, on the files from the end of the last century there is the case of a certain Susan Anthony who had a vivid dream that she was being burned alive in the hotel in which she was staying. On awaking, she informed her niece that they must leave immediately. The next day the hotel did burn to the ground.¹⁴ Now, it is surely interesting that what seems to have been foreseen was not the actual future but a possible one. Conditional prophecy may be perceived in a similar way whereby God warns the people by presenting them with a genuine possible future.

III. Theological Advantages of the Concept of Middle Knowledge

1. Scriptural Teaching

As well as finding warrant for divine Middle Knowledge in the Apocrypha (e.g. Wis. 4:11, 14), Molina also found it in the New Testament (Mt. 11:21) and the Old (1 Sa. 23:9–13). While the reference to Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel may be readily dismissed as rhetorical, the Old Testament passage is more intriguing. At David's request, God informs him that the people of Keilah would hand him over to Saul and so David flees the city before the king arrives. Thus God reveals the outcome of a hypothetical situation which, in fact, never transpires. However, even the advocate of limited foreknowledge would have few problems with this incident for God could have based his prediction on his present perception of the state of the hearts of Keilah's inhabitants. Moreover, as Kenny points out, the ephod oracle consulted by David probably only could answer with a simple affirmative or negative and,

Such an apparatus would be incapable of marking the difference between knowledge of counterfactuals and knowledge of the truth-value of material implications [simple 'if . . . then' propositions]. Since the antecedent of David's question was false, the same answers would have been appropriate in each case.¹⁵

If Middle Knowledge cannot be proved successfully by citing

¹⁴ This and other similar cases are recorded in: D. Zohar, *Through the Time Barrier* (London, 1983), 34–35.

¹⁵ A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford, 1979), 64.

individual biblical passages, a stronger case can be made with reference to major biblical doctrines.

2. *Guidance and Providence*

A God with limited foreknowledge who relied on present trends to discern the future would undoubtedly be ignorant of many future events since not only are human choices unpredictable in detail but also sub-atomic events according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and, if current Chaos Theory¹⁶ is to be taken seriously, perhaps many large scale events in nature too, such as meteorological occurrences. But ironically, a God with simple foreknowledge would fare little better in being able to offer sound guidance or plan ahead his providential strategy. The reason for this is that his foreknowledge must be contingent upon his prior creative fiat of what shall be and it would be logically impossible for him to base a decision to act on his knowledge of how that act would influence the world were he to decide to make it, for such knowledge would in fact be Middle Knowledge. The logic of this is spelled out by D. Basinger who writes, 'Knowledge of the actual results of a decision cannot be presupposed in making the decision'.¹⁷ As Basinger goes on to explain, a God who is hampered in this way cannot be expected to be able to offer the kind of guidance one needs: 'It seems, in other words, that to the extent to which God with PK [Present Knowledge] gives human freedom, he becomes a "cosmic gambler"'.¹⁸ He cannot know how to advise the seeker after guidance because he cannot be sure whether the outcome of an action will ultimately have beneficial consequences. Basinger takes as an example a request for advice over which of two suitors a girl should marry. If God lacks foreknowledge or indeed possesses only simple foreknowledge, he simply does not know who would turn out the better husband. And even if God chose to intervene in human decision-making, he could not know how best to act because the ultimate outcome is often totally surprising.

In a recent work of fiction there is an incidental exploration of

¹⁶ It is a controversial point as to whether Chaos Theory entails that many large scale events are in principle or just in practice unpredictable. J. Polkinghorne, for one, suspects the former [see his *Science and Providence* (London, 1989), 29]. For a full introduction to this fascinating new science see *Chaos* by J. Gleick (London, 1988).

¹⁷ D. Basinger, 'Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought' in *Religious Studies* 22, 1986, 418.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 410.

this sort of question when the characters, who are in a position to travel back in time, wonder whether they should make such a journey, intervene in key events and thus alter the course of history but the protagonist, Augustus Steerforth, seriously cautions them as follows:

What does any one individual or group of people really know about the longer-term destiny of mankind? The twists and turns of history baffle us. We can't make the judgement that the Second World War was in any absolute sense an evil thing. Of course it led to the deaths of millions of people. But it also led to the unification of Western Europe, the liberation of the British Empire, the foundation of the state of Israel and the discovery of rocket motors . . . It is an act of fearful and overweening pride to think that we can judge the best interests of mankind and intervene accordingly in its history.¹⁹

Steerforth is right. For example, it *may* be the case that rocket propulsion would not have been invented without the catalyst of the War and it also *may* be the case that one day the human race will need rockets to escape a doomed planet. Who ultimately can say? Certainly a God lacking Middle Knowledge cannot finally know. He can only deal in probabilities. On the other hand, a being with Middle Knowledge assuredly knows what would have happened if the girl had married either suitor or there had been no World War 2.

3. *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*

Harmonizing these two Scriptural themes has vexed the minds of the greatest theologians, yet that they are biblical seems beyond dispute. As Paul proclaims, we are 'predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purposes of his will' (Eph. 1:11) and yet we are not mere puppets, we can frustrate and grieve God (Eph. 4:30; c.f. Lk. 7:30, 13:34), and, as a race, he holds us completely responsible for our decisions (Rom. 1:18–20). The *textus classicus* of this antinomy is found in Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. The apostle is commanding the people to repent and he proclaims that Jesus 'was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you . . . put him to death by nailing him to the cross' (Acts 2:23).

In the long debate between Calvinism and Arminianism it has been all too easy to ignore one or other horns of the dilemma. The concept of Middle Knowledge offers a way through by

¹⁹ D. Butler, *The Men Who Mastered Time* (London, 1986), 120.

supposing that God's sovereignty is to be understood in terms of his free choice as to which possible universe to actualize. Yet human freedom partially dictates the activities which each possible world contains. Predestination may be seen as a sub-set of divine sovereignty; as Craig explains, 'we might say that it is up to God whether we find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined, but that it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world in which we find ourselves'.²⁰

IV. Theological and Philosophical Problems with Middle Knowledge

1. *Theodicy*

It has been shown that Middle Knowledge is able to make remarkable sense out of the doctrines of providence, guidance, divine sovereignty, human responsibility and predestination but many would argue that its Achilles' heel is in the area of God's responsibility for sin and suffering. For example, Leibniz's 'best possible world' theodicy has been criticized on a number of counts including the coherence of the notion, for not only is it apparently possible always to conceive of a better world than any that may be presented (for instance, one containing a million virtuous people would be superseded by one containing a million and one such people or one containing a million superior virtuous beings, such as angels perhaps) but it is also unclear what, for example, the world containing the best possible symphony might sound like since the very notion seems not to make any sense.

However, the central problem is quite simply why did God not pick a possible world in which everyone always chose the good? Plantinga feels that he can escape what he calls 'Leibniz' Lapse' which was the assumption that God 'was able to create any possible world He pleased'²¹ (as we have seen, this is perhaps a misleading reading of Leibniz) by postulating the notion of 'transworld depravity'. Plantinga's argument is that it is logically possible that a certain creature would freely sin in every possible universe containing that creature. It is further logically possible that every possible creature would sin in every possible universe such that it would be logically impossible for God to actualise a universe containing responsible creatures which would also be free of moral evil. Plantinga's point is that the array of available

²⁰ C. H. Pinnock ed., *op. cit.* 157.

²¹ A. C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 33.

worlds for actualization is contingent upon the undetermined choices of their inhabitants and that perhaps there is no possible world in which everyone always chooses the good.

Following Plantinga's approach, S. T. Davis deals with some subsidiary problems,²² for example: knowing which of the lapsed would choose to be saved and which not, why did not God just actualize the former? Davis replies that perhaps the existence of this group is contingent on the existence of the other. In other words, the personal identity of a certain Christian depends on his having been conceived with certain genes which were only available in a specific father, and perhaps this father freely chooses to rebel against God throughout his life. One might also add the possibility that some people might never have chosen Christ without the negative example of certain inveterate evil-doers.

But the whole concept of transworld depravity seems implausible to someone like John Hick who believes that there is a human bias towards the all-desirable God. Hick maintains that if a free creature were created wholly good, while his specific choices would be unpredictable, nevertheless his behaviour 'is surely predictable in the one centrally relevant respect that he will always make morally right rather than wrong choices'.²³ Leibniz, it will be recalled, disagreed. For him, finitude entails imperfection and indeed one may agree that consequent ignorance and limited strength can all too easily breed mistrust, strife and jealousy. Further, the sense of creaturely contingency inevitably brings insecurity with the temptation to build one's own little earthly empire at the expense of the welfare of others. Then, of course, once sin and selfishness begins, it is very difficult to withstand it (the first student who hoards a book from the reserve-shelf will surely produce a rash of similar behaviour due to the instinct for self-preservation!).

Be this as it may, it is important to remember that no theodicy is free from intractable problems and this includes even a God who is ignorant of the future or one who was so ignorant at the logical moment prior to creation. The sceptic, J. L. Mackie, presents the problem thus: 'He would not then be the author of sin in the sense of having knowingly produced it; he could not be accused of malice aforethought; but he would be open to a charge of gross negligence or recklessness'.²⁴ Whatever view of

²² S. T. Davis ed. *Encountering Evil: live options in theodicy* (Edinburgh, 1982), 80-81.

²³ J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* 2nd. ed. (London, 1977), 369.

²⁴ J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), 176.

divine foreknowledge one espouses, theodicy remains a daunting task.

However, we have still been skirting around the central problem for the concept of Middle Knowledge: how could even an omniscient being know what is neither predictable nor even foreseeable? How could he know the facts either about beings that will never exist or about actual beings in hypothetical circumstances? There surely can be no ontological basis for Middle Knowledge. 'Like Molina, Leibniz tries to have it both ways; God is supposed to know the determinate outcome of an agent's free action, but without the acting of the agent. Yet it is only the acting that could produce the determinateness!'²⁵

2. Ontological Basis

The objection is quite simply that possible worlds ontologists illicitly reify what is purely abstract; possible worlds do not exist to be the objects of Middle Knowledge. This perceived weakness has been the cause of much philosophical merriment. Peter Geach chortles, 'Perhaps the picture is that events stand in line waiting to be admitted to the stage of existence, and some of them are refused admission'²⁶ and continues that it is the same kind of error as 'the absurdity in the schoolboy's essay on 'The Uses of Pins', which concluded with: 'Finally, pins save millions of lives every year by not being swallowed''²⁷ Or J. W. Felt who notes that before *Gone With The Wind* was conceived, there was no 'it' to refer to, 'Mitchell invented it, she did not find it lying around among a preexisting collection of "possibles"'²⁸ and he goes on to change the analogy, observing that the driving of a dune buggy creates the tracks in the sand:

They do not lie out there ahead of you, waiting to be selected. Yet the model suited to most current discussions would rather be that of a railroad engine entering a switchyard. All the tracks are there ahead of time, and the activity of throwing switches merely determines which track the engine winds up on.²⁹

The diagnosis is that language again has bewitched. B. Aune de-mystifies matters when he ponders what we really mean when we claim that 'there is' such a character in a work of fiction,

²⁵ J. W. Felt, 'Impossible Worlds' in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23, 1983, 262.

²⁶ P. T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge, 1977), 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 47.

²⁸ J. W. Felt, *op. cit.* 255.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

we can only mean that such a character is described or referred to in the novel. A novel, being a book, actually contains words and descriptions, not characters and scenes . . . It doesn't follow that just because we can imagine something, there is in the existential sense something that we imagine.³⁰

The defenders of possible worlds respond by insisting that they have never claimed that these worlds are actually real although they are nevertheless real! 'Realism about unactualized possibles is exactly the thesis that there are more things than actually exist'³¹ says Lewis. Behind this debate is the ancient one between Nominalism and Realism: are abstract objects like universals and possible worlds merely linguistic phenomena or do they possess a genuine reality? Are, for example, numbers created or discovered? As philosophical fashion has fluctuated so has the answer to this question. At present we are still living under the shadow of great latter-day Nominalists like Carnap and the other members of the Logical Positivist school who capitalized on our common sense intuition that only spatio-temporal entities are real. But one must beware of historical myopia and some of those old Realist arguments still carry weight. For example, A. O'Hear reminds us of one of them:

In favour of Platonism in mathematics, we can point to the sense of necessity involved in reaching a proof and in the surprising results often achieved in mathematics, which might suggest we are dealing with an objective realm we observe in some way, rather than with a tool for calculating with which we construct and manipulate according to our convenience.³²

In any case, most advocates of Middle Knowledge do not wish to waste time speculating about, say, where possible worlds are to be discovered or how many of them there might be. They rather want to draw attention, as Suarez did before them, to the truth-value of counterfactual propositions and focus the debate there. So let us follow them and again commence the discussion by listening to the critics.

3. *The Truth-Value of Counterfactuals*

For God to be omniscient, he must know the truth-value (i.e. whether they are true or false) of all propositions, but do all propositions carry a truth-value? Many philosophers either deny

³⁰ B. Aune, *Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1986), 71.

³¹ D. Lewis, *op. cit.* 86.

³² A. O'Hear, *What Philosophy Is* (Middx., 1985), 51.

that counterfactuals involving free beings have a truth-value at all (perhaps the inference is that they are not true propositions) or they claim that they are specific propositions which are necessarily false because the specific outcome they describe is in fact strictly indeterminate. In an influential article, R. M. Adams apparently takes this latter position and the core of his argument seems to be that there can be no grounds or bases for such contrary-to-fact conditional statements. After all, they are not based on simple foreknowledge of what shall happen, nor are they predictable from present causes since they include free choices, nor even do they follow from a person's character or intentions since 'A free agent may act out of character, or change his intentions, or fail to act on them'.³³ Adam's position seems to assume the correspondence theory of truth, whereby to be true, a statement must correspond to or picture reality, and his point is that the supposed object of Middle Knowledge in no sense exists.

It seems that we are coming back full circle to the ontological question but advocates of Middle Knowledge have some interesting things to say about the truth-value of counterfactuals. The story goes back, perhaps, to A. Meinong (1853-1923) who insisted that non-existent objects can carry a truth-value. For example, one may affirm that there really is the possibility of golden mountains and that the possibility does not exist of round squares. Plantinga agrees. He insists that counterfactuals certainly seem to be propositions and as such they must be either true or false. Regarding Adam's argument that they are necessarily false, Plantinga responds by accepting the correspondence theory for the sake of argument while admitting that he has reservations about it. Now, he wonders, what grounds the truth that I acted in a certain way yesterday? I was not caused to do it neither was my action predictable. Presumably the answer is that what grounds the act is the fact that I did it. Well, says Plantinga, a counterfactual proposition is similarly true insofar as it expresses what would indeed happen.³⁴ W. L. Craig elaborates by drawing a parallel with simple foreknowledge. The correspondence theory cannot require that a true proposition correspond to a present state of affairs since common sense suggests that future tense propositions must carry truth-value. Similarly, 'at the time at which counterfactual statements are true, it is not required that the circumstances or actions referred to actually

³³ R. M. Adams, 'Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil' in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, 1977, 111.

³⁴ J. Tomberlin & P. Van Inwagen eds., *op. cit.* 374.

exist. The view of truth as correspondence requires only that such actions would be taken if the specified circumstances were to exist'.³⁵

An objection might run that, unlike future tense propositions, we are not actually able to determine the truth-value of a counterfactual involving free choices. However, as well as confusing ontology (what is the case) with epistemology (how what is the case may be known), this objection overlooks the important point that a future tense proposition has a present truth-value before there can be any possible verification of it. R. Otte makes this point:

Propositions about future free choices are true now, which is before we can determine which ones are true, or before the states of affairs that 'ground' their truth are actual. This objection ignores the truth of propositions about future free choices at the present time.³⁶

An alternative strategy in dealing with Adams' attack is to deny that God's knowledge must be subject to the correspondence theory of truth. Basinger frames the objection thus:

Why must MK [Middle Knowledge] be based on, or inferred from, anything else? Why can we not assume that such knowledge is simply primitive, noninferential divine cognition? Or, to use more contemporary terminology, why should we not assume that MK is, for God, properly basic?³⁷

4. *The Identity of Possible Persons*

A further major objection concerns the question of individuation. What can it mean to refer to the same object inhabiting different possible worlds? Commenting on David Lewis' modal realism, P. Weiss writes,

If I say that it was possible for this (yellow) paper on which I am writing to have been white, then I mean it was possible for just *this paper*. On Lewis' theory, however, what I seem to mean is that there is white paper situated similarly to this yellow paper in another world.³⁸

Now, of course, the philosophical problem of identity is time-honoured and consensus is still lacking. For example, there is on-

³⁵ W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 140.

³⁶ R. Otte, 'A Defense of Middle Knowledge' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21, 1987, 168.

³⁷ D. Basinger, *op. art.* 421.

³⁸ P. Weiss, 'Possibility: Three Recent Ontologies' in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 1980, 202.

going debate about whether it is intelligible to speak of the continuing existence of someone at the Resurrection whose being was temporally annihilated at death, or whether spatio-temporal continuity is a prerequisite of continued identity. Arguably such continuity, or at least contiguity, would be present in Everett's parallel universes but surely not in Plantinga's possible worlds.

Advocates of temporary annihilation sometimes appeal to continued existence in the mind of God and this strategy might look promising for the proponents of Middle Knowledge but P. Van Inwagen prefers a more direct approach which has received the effusive blessing of Plantinga ('What he says seems to me perspicuous, wholly accurate, and worthy of a brief celebratory ceremony'³⁹). Van Inwagen wants to avoid the trap of attempting to specify what, for example, Socrates has in common with someone else (his counterpart) who has slightly different characteristics in some other possible world.

On the contrary, the proponent of trans-world identity—the philosopher who believes that objects can exist in more than one world—holds that there is only one Socrates, wise and snubnosed and all the rest, and that he is identical with himself (who else?) and has just the properties he has (what others?).⁴⁰

It is exactly this Socrates who exists in the actual world who also exists in various possible worlds.

An adjunct to the identity problem is that of the possibility of Middle Knowledge given the ontological priority of the actual world to confer sense upon possible world statements; a possible world is a way this world might have been. Critics sense a circular argument. B. Reichenbach expresses it this way: 'The truth of these counterfactual conditionals depends upon God's knowing all counterfactual conditionals'⁴¹ and deciding to actualize one of them. Consequently Middle Knowledge only becomes possible once the fiat to create has occurred, yet the prime theological value of the doctrine, namely its illumination of the puzzles of divine sovereignty, predestination and human freedom, presupposes that Middle Knowledge logically precedes the decision to bring about a particular universe.

Responses have varied from the blunt rejection of the assumption that the actual world is ontologically prior,⁴² to the ingenious suggestion of J. Kvanvig that an actual world must always exist: 'The confusion is that it is simply not possible that there is no

³⁹ J. Tomberlin & P. Van Inwagen eds., *op. cit.* 313.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 115.

⁴¹ B. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (N. York, 1982), 15.

⁴² W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 142.

actual world; though it is possible that the actual world is one in which God has not (yet) created anything'.⁴⁴ This world will include all necessary entities including numbers and what Kvanvig calls 'essences' (following Plantinga) which are properties unique to every possible object, and these are all God needs for Middle Knowledge to be possible prior to the decision to create.

5. Ockham's Razor

There is space to mention one final objection to possible worlds ontologies and that is the criticism that they contravene the principle of parsimony: 'Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity'. They are extravagantly profligate with their universes! Ironically, while Wheeler has been watching his disciples growing in number, he himself has abandoned the multiple universes hypothesis for just this reason, for as he says, 'I am afraid it carries too great a load of metaphysical baggage'.⁴⁴

In response, Lewis makes a useful distinction between qualitative and quantitative parsimony.⁴⁵ The former attempts to reduce the fundamentally different kinds of entity (e.g. bodies alone, rather than bodies and spirits) and the latter keeps down the number of instances of a particular entity (e.g. spirits for people only, rather than people and animals). For his part, Lewis sees the value of qualitative parsimony but sees no advantage in quantitative parsimony. Consequently, his metaphysic is unscathed since he ultimately believes in only actual universes (what is a possible world from my perspective is in fact actual for a being in that universe). Lewis' argument would also work for Everett's actual parallel universes but surely the argument has limited value for Plantinga for whom the distinction between actual and possible remains basic.

V. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to inform a wider audience of some of the main issues in a fascinating discussion that is taking place largely in America. Undoubtedly there is much work yet to be done, for example in clarifying the notion of trans-world identity, but much has been achieved by the proponents of Middle Knowledge and possible worlds ontology. Not only is it a philosophically intriguing debate but it also promises to shed light on

⁴³ J. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (London, 1986), 140.

⁴⁴ Quoted in J. Gribbin, *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat* (London, 1985), 245.

⁴⁵ D. Lewis, *op. cit.* 87.

some intractable Scriptural conundrums. As members of the evangelical fraternity who wish to receive these diverse biblical strands with utmost seriousness, there is great incentive for us to join in the task of assessing the intelligibility of the concept of Middle Knowledge which offers a middle way between the exegetical excesses so prevalent in both Calvinist and Arminian scholarship.