A defense of middle knowledge

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One of the most persistent problems that faces a theist is known as the problem of evil. Although there are various ways to state the problem, the intuition behind the problem seems to be that there were several possible worlds that God could have actualized. God knew which actions he could perform, and he knew the results of each action that he might perform. Another way of saying this is that God knew true deliberative conditionals of the form:

(1) If I were to do action x, outcome y would occur.

Since God is omniscient, he knows all true deliberative conditionals, which means that he knows what actions would be necessary for him to perform in order to bring about a certain outcome. Because he is omnipotent, he can do whatever action is necessary to bring about a certain outcome that he desires. His benevolence implies that he will want to actualize the best possible world, or at least a world containing no evil. Given this scenario it is argued that evil should not exist in the world; God will want to actualize the best possible world, he will know how to do it, and he will be able to do it. But evil does exist; hence either God does not exist, or he is not omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent.

Philosophers have responded to this problem in many different ways, but one of the most important responses has been the free will defense. A modern proponent of the free will defense, Alvin Plantinga, argues that the conclusion of the atheological argument does not follow from its premises.[1] Because humans are free creatures, it is possible that no matter what God does, humans will

make free choices in such a way that there will be evil in the world. Plantinga would agree that God knows all true deliberative conditionals, but he argues that it is possible that no matter which set of actions God chooses to perform, if there are free humans, they will freely choose in such a way that evil will result. This free will defense is based on the idea that there are certain possible worlds that God cannot actualize, even though he is omnipotent. Since God knows all true deliberative conditionals, he knows which possible worlds he can actualize. But God may not be required or obligated to refrain from actualizing a world containing moral evil, because it may not be possible for God to actualize a world containing free beings who always freely choose good, even if he is omnipotent and omniscient. It is possible that the actual world is such that if God were to actualize a world containing less evil, then the overall balance of good over evil would also be less. Thus the claim that the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God is inconsistent with the existence of evil is seen to be false.

Recently Robert Adams has questioned some aspects of Plantinga's free will defense.[2] Adams agrees with Plantinga's acceptance of a libertarian view of free will, but disagrees with him on whether the deliberative conditionals and counterfactuals that are used in his free will defense are true. Let us consider a simple example which will illustrate the problems that Adams finds with Plantinga's free will defense. Imagine that God has not created the world yet, and *per impossibile*, he is deliberating about what actions he should perform. Specifically, he is wondering whether to create Adam and Eve and place them in the garden. In deciding whether to create Eve, God will base his decision on subjunctive conditionals such as the following:

(2) If Eve were placed in the garden, she would take the apple,

and

(3) If Eve were placed in the garden, she would not take the apple.

In his free will defense Plantinga assumed that at least one of those conditionals is true and the other is false. This assumption is an instance of the law of conditional excluded middle. A consequent of this principle would be that God would have knowledge of what every possible creature would do in every possible situation; this knowledge that God would have was called "middle knowledge" by the 16th century Jesuits.[3] One reason it was called this was that it was knowledge of something in between what is actual and what is merely possible.

Adams rejects the law of conditional excluded middle, and thus he thinks that Plantinga's free will defense is inadequate because it depends on God having middle knowledge. His reason for rejecting these conditionals is that they involve the choices of free beings. If we call conditionals such as these "conditionals of freedom", we can summarize Adams' objection by saying that all conditionals of freedom are false. Furthermore, it appears that Adams wants to make the stronger claim that conditionals of freedom are necessarily false. (pp. 109, 111) Since God does not know any false propositions, this would imply that God does not have middle knowledge; thus God does not know what every possible free creature would do for certain in every possible situation.

In the following we will take a closer look at Adams' rejection of the possibility of middle knowledge. After looking carefully at Adams' reasons for rejecting middle knowledge, we will inquire into the relationship between middle knowledge and divine foreknowledge. In particular, we will be interested in whether Adams' reasons for rejecting the possibility of middle knowledge also provide reasons for rejecting the possibility of foreknowledge.

Adams' rejection of middle knowledge

Adams rejects the possibility of middle knowledge because he believes that conditionals of freedom are necessarily false. The reason Adams believes that conditionals of freedom are necessarily false is that he cannot understand what it would be for them to be true. (p. 110) Evidently Adams desires an account of what it would be for conditionals of freedom to be true.

Adams considers several proposals of what it might be for a

conditional of freedom to be true. One proposal Adams considers is that counterfactuals are true if the antecedent necessitates the consequent in some way. (p. 111) Adams does not endorse this proposal, and he argues that it is an inadequate account of true conditionals of freedom. Adams correctly notices that this proposal is inconsistent with the assumption that the actions in question are free. If the antecedent either causally or logically necessitates the consequent of the conditional, it is not a conditional of freedom. Since Adams is questioning the possibility of conditionals of freedom being true, this proposal is inadequate.

In addition to being an inadequate account of true conditionals of freedom, the above proposal is an inadequate account of true counterfactuals in which the consequent is causally necessitated by the antecedent. Suppose that one considers a miracle to be a break in the laws of nature, or a violation of a causal law. If so, some event may be causally necessitated by the present state of affairs, and not occur, because of a miracle that might occur. It is also possible for event C to causally necessitate event E, and yet it be false that if C were to occur, E would occur. If C were to occur, a miracle might happen which would prevent E from occurring. If the proposition *if C were to occur, E would occur* is true, it is true not because C causally necessitates E, but rather because E would occur if C were to occur. It is a mistake to analyze counterfactuals in terms of causal necessitation. Causal necessitation may be evidence that a counterfactual is true, but the counterfactual is not true in virtue of the antecedent causally necessitating the consequent. Causal necessitation is good evidence that certain states of affairs would occur, which is what makes the conditionals true.[4]

Another proposal which Adams considers is that conditionals of freedom are true because of the actual intentions, desires, and characters of the free beings involved. (p. 111) However, Adams points out that free agents may act out of character, or fail to act on their desires. That the agent has certain desires does not imply that he will act on them. But if the agent's character, intentions, and desires do not necessitate a free choice in any way, there would seem to be no basis for saying that a free agent would act in accordance with those factors. Given this lack of an explanation of what it is for conditionals of freedom to be true, Adams

believes that "there is reason to doubt the possibility of middle knowledge. Those who believe it possible have some explaining to do." (p. 111)

Middle knowledge and foreknowledge

A doctrine of traditional theism, which Adams does not deny, is that God has foreknowledge of everything that will happen in the future. This foreknowledge includes the choices of free beings. Early debates about middle knowledge revolved around the question of how it was possible for God to have foreknowledge. The Dominicans thought God's foreknowledge was based on knowledge of his will and its effects. They accepted a compatibilist view of free will, upon which our free actions are effects of God's actions. Hence God would have knowledge of our free actions because he has knowledge of his will and its effects. Molina and Suarez rejected the Dominicans' view of free will, and hence they could not account for God's foreknowledge in the way that the Dominicans did. Molina and Suarez thought that God's foreknowledge was based on middle knowledge and knowledge of his will. Since God knows what every possible being would do in every possible situation, and since God knows what situations he will place free beings in, God knows what free beings will do in the future.

Adams rejects the Dominican position on free will, and Molina's position on middle knowledge; hence he cannot adopt either of those explanations of God's foreknowledge. Although it would be interesting to know how Adams would account for God's foreknowledge, it is not obvious that an account of God's foreknowledge is even needed. Perhaps God knows in a basic way all true propositions. If this is true, it would not be necessary for God's foreknowledge to be based upon anything else, such as middle knowledge, or knowledge of his will and its effects. Since I consider this position plausible, I do not think that Adams is required to give an account of how God can have foreknowledge without middle knowledge.

However, there would be a problem for God's foreknowledge if it were impossible for propositions about future free choices to

be true. Given Adams' basis for rejecting the possibility of true conditionals of freedom, it is legitimate to require an account of what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true. Adams rejected the possibility of true conditionals of freedom because he did not believe an account could be given of what it is by virtue of which they are true or false. Hence if there is no acceptable account of what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true, Adams should reject them also. In the following I will argue that it is no less difficult to account for the truth of propositions about future free choices than it is to account for the truth of conditionals of freedom. An account of what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true is very similar to an account of what it is for conditionals of freedom to be true.

Let us first consider some proposals of what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true. One proposal is that the currently actual state of affairs necessitates in some way propositions about future free choices. Propositions about future free choices would be true because they are either causally or logically implied by current states of affairs. However, this proposal is inconsistent with the proposition being about a future *free* choice. The libertarian conception of freedom requires that a free choice be neither causally nor logically necessitated by previous states of affairs. Furthermore, this proposal is inconsistent with the common view that time has a branching structure; given the present state of affairs, there are several possible future states of affairs.[5] The present state of affairs does not determine which branch will become the actual world. This proposal is unable to account for true propositions about future free choices for the same reason that it is unable to account for true conditionals of freedom. Hence this proposal is inadequate.

In addition to being unable to account for true propositions about future free choices, this proposal cannot adequately account for true propositions about future events that are causally necessitated by present events. Even if an event is causally necessitated by some present state of affairs, it is possible that a miracle occur, and the event not occur. Hence propositions about future events are not true because they are causally necessitated by present events or states of affairs.

Another reason one might think that propositions about future

free choices are true is because of the agent's character, intentions, and desires. However, as Adams pointed out, an agent can act out of character, or not act on his or her desires. Thus propositions about future free choices cannot be true because of the agent's character, desires, or intentions.

The most popular solution to this problem is that propositions about future free choices are true because what they claim will occur actually occurs. According to Adams, "most philosophers ... have supposed that categorical predictions, even about contingent events, can be true by corresponding to the actual occurrence of the event that they predict." (p. 110) In general, a proposition of the form *q is true at time t*, where t is some future time, is true if and only if the state of affairs corresponding to q will be actual at time t.

According to this proposal, propositions about future free choices are true because they correspond to what *will* happen, or what *will* be actual at a certain time. But this does not appear to be significantly different from saying that conditionals of freedom are true because they correspond to what *would* happen, or what *would* be actual in certain situations. We cannot explain what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true without talking about what *will* happen. Similarly, we cannot explain what it is for conditionals of freedom to be true without the concept of what *would* happen. But what will happen is not necessitated by any actual states of affairs, and what would happen if certain states of affairs were actual is not necessitated by those states of affairs. Neither propositions about future free actions nor conditionals of freedom are true in virtue of corresponding to any actual states of affairs, or any states of affairs necessitated by them. Both are true in virtue of corresponding to some state of affairs that is neither actual nor is necessitated in any way by what is actual. But then it would seem to be no easier to account for true propositions about future free actions than it is to account for true conditionals of freedom. If one rejects accounting for true conditionals of freedom in terms of what would happen, one should also reject accounting for true propositions about future free actions in terms of what will happen. Neither is more problematic than the other.

One might respond to my argument by pointing out that there

are differences between conditionals of freedom and propositions about future free choices. For example, we can eventually determine if a proposition about a future free choice is true, but we are never able to determine if a conditional of freedom is true. The states of affairs that make a proposition about a future free choice true will be actual at some time, whereas the states of affairs that a conditional of freedom is based on may never be actual. However, this does not imply that what makes a proposition about a future free choice true is any better understood than what mades a conditional of freedom true. 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. Although there are important differences between conditionals of freedom and propositions about future free choices, there is no reason to think that we have a better understanding of what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true than we do of what it is for conditionals of freedom to be true.

Conclusion

Adams has not demonstrated that conditionals of freedom are necessarily false, just as I have not demonstrated that they are possibly true. According to Adams, we have good reason to think that they are not possibly true because we do not know what it is for them to be true. This is basically the claim that we cannot explain conditionals of freedom without reference to what would happen in certain situations. I argued that similar considerations apply to propositions about future free choices. We cannot explain propositions about future free choices without reference to what will happen. Neither conditionals of freedom nor propositions about future free choices are true in virtue of corresponding to actual states of affairs or any states of affairs that are necessitated by certain other states of affairs. In both instances we must appeal to states of affairs that are not determined to be actual by either the present states of affairs or the antecedent of the counterfactual. I do not consider this difficulty with proposi-

tions about future free choices to be a sufficient reason to reject the possibility of them being true. They are true because they correspond to what will happen. But then I also do not believe that Adams' reasons are sufficient to reject the possibility of true conditionals of freedom. They are true because they correspond with what would happen in certain counterfactual situations. Hence it is no more difficult to understand what it is for conditionals of freedom to be true than it is to understand what it is for propositions about future free choices to be true. I conclude that, contrary to Adams, it is possible for God to have middle knowledge.

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1974), Chapter IX, and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).
2. Robert M. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14.2 (April 1977):109–117.
3. Plantinga would object to an ontology of possible beings, but talk about possible beings can be translated into his ontology by talking about uninstantiated essences.
4. I also think it is a mistake to claim that the antecedent of a counterfactual logically necessitating the consequent makes a counterfactual true. If a counterfactual has an impossible antecedent, then everything is logically necessitated by that antecedent. But it would be a mistake to say that all counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are true; many counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are false. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Alfred J. Freddoso, "Human Nature, Potency and the Incarnation", *Faith and Philosophy* 3.1 (1986):27–53.
5. Ockham's distinction between hard and soft facts is relevant to this issue. Ockham would claim that the hard facts about the present are consistent with many different futures, whereas only one future is consistent with all of the current facts about the world. For our purposes, we will ignore the soft facts which create complications here.