

## MONERGISTIC MOLINISM

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**ABSTRACT.** Several philosophers and theologians (including Stump, Cross, Timpe, Keathley, and Evans) have attempted to formulate monergistic, soft libertarian accounts of salvation. These accounts hold that the sinner has the ability to either resist or to do nothing at all with God’s universally given saving grace, in which latter case God will save her. However, I wonder with Cyr and Flummer whether these accounts go far enough because the nonresistant sinner voluntarily remains quiescent and is therefore arguably praiseworthy. I aim to remedy this alleged weakness by formulating a possible account on which it never crosses the nonresistant sinner’s mind to resist, making her quiescence an involuntary omission. For all sinners whose minds it crosses to resist, they, on the proposed account, freely choose to resist. Combining Molinism with the scriptural notion of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, I proceed to explain why it may cross the mind of some sinners and not others to resist.

**KEY WORDS:** monergism, Molinism, Pelagianism, soft libertarianism, grace

### **Introduction**

Suppose one holds to monergism and total depravity and yet denies divine determinism when it comes to salvation. [I hold neither to monergism (at least in any conventional form) nor to total depravity. However, for the sake of constructive dialogue with my Reformed sisters and brothers, the present account presupposes both of these doctrines.] Rejecting both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, one maintains that salvation is entirely of God, while damnation is entirely of human beings. Despite that human acceptance of God’s saving grace is accomplished by God alone, one insists that the blame for soteriological evil does not trace back to God. Can this set of beliefs consistently be embraced? Several philosophers and theologians—most notably Eleonore Stump (2003), Richard Cross (2005), Kevin Timpe (2007), Kenneth Keathley (2010), and Jeremy Evans (2010)—have attempted to justify an affirmative answer to this question. All of these thinkers contend that God gives his saving grace to every human being. All of these thinkers are

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also soft libertarians, asserting that a free individual can choose between any of the options consistent with her nature at all points. At most points, the options consistent with the individual's nature are several rather than simply one. But at some points, no significant options may be available; a free individual having already jumped off a cliff cannot choose to stop falling on the way down.

For a totally depraved individual, the options consistent with her nature (all of which may not be available at every point) range over anything on the spectrum from absolute spiritual evil to nothing at all. She cannot choose to do anything spiritually good, or volitionally pleasing in the sight of God. That doing nothing at all, or quiescence, constitutes an option was first identified by Stump as the key to the affirmative answer to our inquiry. When confronted with God's saving grace, the individual cannot accept it, but she can remain quiescent rather than rejecting it, in which case grace efficaciously saves her by the production of justifying faith (Stump 2003: 140). This model, which finds support in Cross, Timpe, and Keathley, may be denominated an ambulatory model of overcoming grace. Keathley furnishes the following illustration:

Imagine waking up to find you are being transported by an ambulance to the emergency room. It is clearly evident that your condition requires serious medical help. If you do nothing, you will be delivered to the hospital. However, if for whatever reason you demand to be let out, the driver will comply. He may express regret and give warnings, but he will still let you go. You get no credit for being taken to the hospital, but you incur the blame for refusing the services of the ambulance (Keathley 2010: 104).

The issue now becomes: does this model ward off the spectres of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism?

Taylor Cyr and Matthew Flummer (2017) summarize these spectres in the following two worries. The Pelagian worry is that humans cause some good part of their salvation, such as their coming to have faith, apart from grace. To avert this first worry, divine grace must be the only non-instrumental efficient cause of justifying faith. The semi-Pelagian worry is that humans behave meritoriously prior to the salvifically efficacious work of grace, such that 'praise should be due to the human being for some part of salvation' (Cyr and Flummer 2017: 5). To avert this second worry, a person must not deserve praise for any act in the sequence of events culminating in her salvation. [In my own work, I (MacGregor 2007: 159) avert this worry by maintaining that freely committing one's life to God is one's moral duty, and that doing one's duty is not praiseworthy, much less meritorious (Luke 17:7-10). Only supererogatory acts are praiseworthy and possibly meritorious. However, Christians of a Reformed persuasion will not find my

explanation sufficient. Therefore, this article presupposes for argument's sake that my explanation fails.] I concur with Cyr and Flummer that the ambulatory model indeed averts the Pelagian worry, since God alone is the causal source of a person's justifying faith. Here I follow Phil Dowe (2001), Judith Jarvis Thomson (2003), and Sarah McGrath (2005) in stipulating that omissions, such as not resisting salvific grace, are not efficient causes.

However, I also wonder with Cyr and Flummer whether the versions of the ambulatory model put forward by Stump, Cross, Timpe, Keathley, and Evans successfully avert the semi-Pelagian worry as Reformed theology would construe it. [Simon Kittle (2015) thus deems the accounts of Stump and Timpe to be semi-Pelagian.] For Cross, Timpe, Keathley, and Evans, the saved individual is morally responsible for omitting to resist grace, such that the individual is arguably praiseworthy for the omission. Cyr and Flummer furnish three examples to show that sometimes omissions are indeed praiseworthy, of which I quote the third:

*Beer:* Jethro is an alcoholic. He's in the middle of his first year of sobriety, and when he gets home from an AA meeting one night, his brother just happens to be at his house with a six-pack of his favorite beer. The cravings for the alcohol are so intense that he feels physical pain. But he doesn't give in to the cravings, and he omits taking a drink (Cyr and Flummer 2017: 7).

Neither Cross nor Timpe nor Keathley nor Evans give any reason to suppose that the saved individual is not similarly praiseworthy for omitting to resist grace. In fact, Timpe virtually grants the point that the individual is, in fact, praiseworthy in claiming that 'the individual controls whether or not she comes to have saving faith' (Timpe 2007: 289). While the individual does not cause saving faith, this control of what the individual does not cause represents a 'quasicause' of saving faith (Timpe 2007: 290). If one controls something good, not to mention doing something parallel to causing it, the *prima facie* intuition is that one is praiseworthy for exercising such control.

In my judgment, Stump comes the closest to averting the semi-Pelagian worry but without going far enough. She asserts both that 'it is up to a human willer, and to her alone, whether her will refuses grace or is quiescent with regard to grace' and that 'this is not to say that the human willer at issue looks at the options of refusing grace or being quiescent with regard to grace and forms a decision about which of the options should characterize her will' (Stump 2003: 402). But Stump does not satisfactorily explain how these seemingly contradictory tenets can simultaneously be true. To escape our worry, one would need an account of why the agent's will ceases to resist grace, where the 'why' cannot involve something for which the individual is arguably praiseworthy.

In this article, I aim to construct a logically possible account of why the agent's will ceases to resist grace which does not involve positing anything for which the individual is arguably praiseworthy. To do this, I shall propose an explanation of what does and does not render an omission praiseworthy. I shall avail myself of the biblical motifs of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and hardening one's heart. I shall argue that Molinism is both a necessary feature of my account and renders that account consistent with God's omnibenevolence, thereby absolving God of the soteriological problem of evil.

### **Unpraiseworthy Omissions vs. Praiseworthy Omissions**

Let us try to identify various sufficient conditions for an omission to be unpraiseworthy, so indirectly arriving at a set of necessary conditions for an omission to be praiseworthy. One sufficient condition for unpraiseworthiness is implied by Stump's contention that the individual who omits rejecting saving grace does not first consider the options of rejecting or being quiescent with regard to grace and then make a decision. The individual thereby appears to involuntarily omit rejecting grace. Clearly, I am not praiseworthy for involuntary actions, such as breathing or my heart beating. If this is true of involuntary actions, how much more is it true of involuntary inactions, such as doing nothing when one does not realize that one can do something! If it doesn't cross my mind to steal paper from the copy room, and I don't, my omission of paper-stealing is in no way praiseworthy. Hence any involuntary omission is unpraiseworthy. By contrast, a voluntary omission may be praiseworthy, as seen in the aforementioned beer example.

Another sufficient condition for unpraiseworthiness is suggested by Cyr and Flummer: 'For instance, I'm not robbing a bank, stabbing an old lady, raping and pillaging, etc. And surely I'm not praiseworthy for all of these omissions' (Cyr and Flummer 2017: 7). In all these cases, one is omitting doing something intrinsically heinous. And avoiding doing something intrinsically heinous is never praiseworthy, even if one has the opportunity to carry it out. This remains the case when someone possesses the habit to commit the heinous act. We do not praise a serial killer or serial rapist for omitting to murder or rape their next potential victim. But while the omission of an intrinsically heinous act is unpraiseworthy, the omission of a morally bad action which does not rise to the level of heinousness could be praiseworthy. Since injecting oneself with heroin is not heinous (though it may be morally bad), the drug addict may indeed do something praiseworthy by not shooting up. Likewise, parents frequently praise their children for omitting to take illegal drugs.

At this juncture, the question arises: what about resisting God's saving grace? Following Anselm, some theological traditions would argue that this is intrinsically heinous. For Anselm, the magnitude of any sin is directly proportional to the value of the being who is wronged (Anselm 1998: 303-309). Since God is the greatest conceivable being, resisting saving grace offends a being of infinite value and is therefore a sin of infinite gravity, an intrinsically heinous act indeed. If one shares Anselm's judgment, then one would conclude that omitting resistance of God's saving grace is not praiseworthy, thus assuaging the semi-Pelagian worry. However, Anselm's criterion for assessing the magnitude of sin seems multiply flawed. It would make insulting a human morally equivalent to murdering a human, since in either case a being of equal value is wronged. Such a conclusion is absurd. On the same score, Anselm's criterion fails to distinguish between various wrongs committed against God. But is it really the case, on Christian theology, that praying with selfish motives (James 4:3) is just as bad as hating God and worshiping an idol instead (Exodus 20:3-5)? Certainly, the biblical authors did not think so: the former offense results in not getting what one requested, while the latter offense potentially exposes one and one's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to divine punishment. [Whether the biblical threat of punishing the descendants to the third or fourth generation is religious hyperbole or is intended to be taken literally is not to be adjudicated here. For my purpose, it is sufficient to point out that the act of hating God and worshiping an idol in God's place is so bad as to warrant a punishment to the offender so severe that it could be hyperbolically extended to one's posterity. If the text is to be taken literally, then the question becomes how God could possibly be just in imposing such punishment, especially in light of the teaching of Ezekiel 18:1-20 that the child does not suffer for the sins of the parent. That is a subject for another article. However, my rough sketch of an answer resorts to Molinism to suggest that God has so providentially ordered the world through his middle knowledge that any God-hating idolater would have children, grandchildren, and possibly great-grandchildren who freely sin to such a degree that they merit God's punishment.] Finally, Anselm's criterion conflicts with widespread moral intuition. For virtually all non-Christians and probably most Christians, it does not seem that resisting God's saving grace is tantamount to murder or rape. Today we find it barbaric to subject 'nonbelievers' to the same punishments as murderers and rapists, denouncing societies which enforce such penalties as guilty of human rights violations.

The reasons why resisting God's saving grace seems less severe than indisputably heinous acts are two in number, which I will state here and substantiate at a later point in the article. First, resistance does offend and sadden God, but no more than any 'non-religious' sin. Second, since God is

only minimally wronged, the resister primarily harms herself, refusing to avail herself of qualitatively eternal life in the present and the guarantee of quantitatively eternal blessings. Indisputably heinous sins tremendously offend the one sinned against, not the sinner.

A third sufficient condition for an omission to be unpraiseworthy is that it has no reasonable chance of benefiting anyone. For in that case, we have every reason to believe that the omission is gratuitous. By contrast, an omission may be praiseworthy if it has a reasonable chance of benefiting someone, either the ommitter or a third party. To illustrate, suppose that Joe and many other people have been trapped inside a building by terrorists. Suppose the terrorists have set up a contraption such that if Joe moves during the next two hours, he will set off a motion detector that will in turn cause a lethal gas to be released into a room where twenty children are being held hostage. The terrorists let Joe know how the contraption works. For the next two hours, Joe does not move, such that the children are spared (Isaacs 1997: 484; Cyr and Flummer 2017: 7).

In sum, an omission is unpraiseworthy if any of the following conditions are met: (1) it is involuntary; (2) it omits something intrinsically heinous; (3) it has no reasonable chance of benefiting anyone. Consequently, an omission has the possibility of being praiseworthy if all three of the following conditions are met: (1) it is voluntary; (2) it is not an omission of something intrinsically heinous; (3) it has a reasonable chance of benefiting someone, either the ommitter or a third party. There may well be additional necessary conditions for praiseworthiness, such as right motives (Isaacs 1997: 485-493), but they are not relevant to my purpose here.

### **Ceasing to Resist Grace in an Unpraiseworthy Manner**

I propose that when a totally depraved person omits resisting God's saving grace, it never crosses her mind to resist. Now it does cross the person's mind to resist God's saving grace at other times, but it does not cross her mind during the period when she is quiescent. This period of quiescence may be momentary, as God's saving grace may work faith in the person instantaneously, or it may be extended, as God's saving grace may work faith in the person after a span of time. If extended, the period of quiescence may be either continuous or discontinuous. But in any case, since it never occurs to the totally depraved person to resist at all points when she is quiescent, her omission is involuntary and therefore unpraiseworthy. This conclusion can only be averted by affirming that the person previously engaged in something praiseworthy which made it possible for resisting saving grace not to occur to her. I will argue that the person indeed omitted to do something which made it possible for resisting saving grace not to occur to her,

but that this ‘something’ is intrinsically heinous, rendering its omission therefore unpraiseworthy. Let me proceed to a defense of my proposal.

According to Titus 2:11, ‘the grace of God has appeared that brings salvation to all people’. [All translations of Scripture are my own.] Hence God’s saving grace is universally offered to humanity. I suggest that up to the moment of any individual’s salvation, God offers her this grace continually. Assuming the falsity of universalism, it follows that this grace is resistible. Recall that a totally depraved person can do anything on the spectrum from absolute spiritual evil to nothing at all with the caveat that ‘those who are in the flesh are not able to please God’ (Romans 8:8). Since voluntarily omitting rejection of God’s saving grace meets our three necessary conditions for praiseworthy omissions, we shall concede that voluntary quiescence is praiseworthy. Hence when the totally depraved person is aware that she can resist God’s saving grace, she must resist it, and her only option is the level at which resistance occurs. Will she resist mildly, with the uttermost severity, or somewhere in between? That is up to her, as any of these options is compatible with her depraved nature. Certainly, she is unaware that it is beneficial for her not to resist saving grace. For the totally depraved person does not have the ability to possess this awareness, as this awareness is spiritually good and thus lies outside the cognitive domain accessible to her.

Jesus made a very intriguing comment at Mark 3:28-29 that may bear directly on our discussion: ‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven (*aphethēsetai*, future passive indicative) all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.’ If we interpret this text quite literally, it could be taken to mean that all the sins of humanity will actually be forgiven except the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. [I am not here defending this interpretation but simply presenting it as a possibility.] But how can it be the case that all sins will be forgiven people except the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, an observation entailing that everyone except Spirit-blasphemers will be forgiven of their sins? Since forgiveness of sins is the result of justification, and justification cannot occur apart from salvation, it would follow that everyone except Spirit-blasphemers will be saved. And salvation comes about by being quiescent for a period of time with respect to God’s saving grace. But no totally depraved person can please God by being voluntarily quiescent for any period of time. Hence it would follow from this interpretation of Jesus’ observation that totally depraved persons who do not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will eventually be involuntarily, and so unpraiseworthy, quiescent with respect to God’s saving grace.

Incredibly, it is possible that anyone who resists God’s saving grace at whatever level of severity, so long as they do not blaspheme against the Ho-

ly Spirit, will ultimately be saved. I shall argue in due time that resistance of saving grace at increased levels of severity causes proportional damage to the soul, but all such damage will be ultimately remedied by saving grace. A good case can be made that resisting God's saving grace is the indirect cause (or, in Timpe's nomenclature, 'quasi-cause') of all 'non-religious' sins (e.g. lying, cheating, adultery, grand theft auto), since saving grace precludes the inclination to commit these sins. In fact, the level at which resistance occurs is likely a necessary but not sufficient condition for the person to commit other sins at that level. Thus the 'good atheist' (so it seems to us, but not in the eyes of God) only resists saving grace to a mild level, thus inclining her to only socially acceptable sins. The hardened criminal resists saving grace with great severity, thus inclining her to socially unacceptable sins. These insights substantiate my earlier point that resistance of saving grace does not offend or grieve God more than any 'non-religious' sin. For resistance of saving grace, like any 'non-religious' sin, is not ultimately what damns anyone. As William Lane Craig remarks, 'We ought not, therefore, to think of hell primarily as punishment for the array of sins of finite consequence which we have committed, but as the just due for a sin of infinite consequence' (Craig 1994). This sin, on the present interpretation of Jesus' words, is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Likewise, these insights substantiate my additional point that the resister of saving grace primarily only harms herself. God is not ultimately grieved by voluntary resistance of his saving grace because it does not cost him an eternal, love relationship with anyone for eternity. But the resister inclines herself to other sins which may prove quite damaging to her earthly life and, as we shall see later, lengthens the period of time before she experiences qualitatively eternal life on earth.

At this point we come to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In his magisterial commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Robert Gundry identifies the Marcan manifestation of this sin as the 'hardened determination to interpret in the worst possible way the Holy Spirit's working through [Jesus]' (Gundry 1993: 183). For the Jerusalem scribes identified the work of the Holy Spirit in exorcising demons through Jesus as the work of Satan himself, despite the utter illogicality of the charge (Mark 3:22-27). Hence the scribes were, in fact, identifying God himself as ultimate evil and rejecting God as such. We may therefore generalize the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the deliberate and irrevocable rejection of the being of God—not merely the saving grace of God—as absolute evil, resolving to permanently eschew God as such. Further insight may be shed on this topic by 1 John 5:16-17 and Hebrews 6:4-6, which describe an unforgivable sin. Since Jesus made clear that there is only one unforgivable sin (by remarking that all other sins will be forgiven), the present account stipulates that 1 John 5:16-



17 and Hebrews 6:4-6 are describing the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. While some expositors take 1 John 5:16-17 and Hebrews 6:4-6 as depicting a sin (namely, apostasy) that can be committed by genuinely saved individuals (in which case saved individuals are responsible for maintaining their salvation, thus undercutting monergism), Reformed expositors (MacArthur 2007: 99-100; O'Donnell 2015: 81-82; Storms 2015: 53-54) typically argue from the context of 1 John that this sin cannot be committed by saved individuals but can be committed by unsaved, nominal Christians who, prior to their abject renunciation of God, took part in the activities of the church: 'They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going out made it plain that none of them belonged to us' (1 John 2:19).

1 John 5:16-17 affirms that if we see someone 'committing a sin not leading to death', we can pray for her, and, amazingly, 'God will give (*dōsei*, future active indicative) life to such a person'. But if someone commits the 'sin leading to death', we are instructed not to pray about that because such prayer is pointless; the person's eternal condemnation has already been sealed. Persons who commit the sin leading to death renounce God to such a point that they become 'antichrists' (1 John 2:18). Poignantly, we are told that those who commit this sin are 'crucifying to themselves the Son of God and holding him up to contempt' (Hebrews 6:6). In other words, this sin is tantamount to premeditated murder, equivalent to crucifying Jesus all over again despite knowing his divine identity, such that Jesus would not have said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34), since its committers know full well what they are doing. Hence the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is intrinsically heinous. It includes, amazingly, the commission of spiritual murder against Jesus and thereby grievously harms God.

Not only does the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit directly wrong God, but it also wrongs its committer in a manner that further wrongs God. For this blasphemy entails permanently hardening one's heart against God by destroying the mental faculty which receives God's saving grace. It is therefore irremediably damnable. Such permanent hardening stands opposed to the forgivable temporary hardening of a person's heart toward God that occurs on a regular basis (1 Samuel 6:6; Psalm 95:8; Proverbs 28:14; Mark 6:52; 8:17; Ephesians 4:18; Hebrews 3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). While it is granted that the totally depraved person cannot choose to soften her heart toward God, as that would be praiseworthy, she has the choice between temporarily hardening her heart toward God and permanently hardening her heart toward God. The totally depraved person has to go out of her way to do the latter, as it cannot be willed in and of itself the way that temporary hardening can. One can only permanently harden the heart toward God by irrevocably

cably rejecting God as absolute evil, crucifying again the Son of God. Thus, omitting to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit—and instead performing the lesser evil temporarily hardening one's heart toward God—is not praiseworthy. For one is omitting something not only intrinsically heinous but something which also robs God of permanent relationship with one of his creatures and so causes God eternal grief.

So, suppose a totally depraved person omits blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. How is it possible, for all her other rebellion, to be saved? Here we turn to psychology, specifically to the process of habituation. In habituation, when one is inundated by something which one innately resists (one must possess the mental faculty to be inundated by it), eventually the mind's power of resistance is spent and the mind does not even realize that the seemingly distasteful entity is there. While the power of resistance may come back again (as habituation is not extinction), moments of involuntary quiescence do occur (Bouton 2016: 44-45). Let us furnish two examples. (1) The two-year-old who is inundated by the fact that he cannot have a toy will throw a tantrum for perhaps a very long time until his mental energy is spent and he fails to even realize he does not have the toy. Even the two-year-old's tantrum cannot last forever! Once his mental energy returns and he realizes again he does not have the toy, he may well throw another tantrum, which may be less severe than the previous tantrum. (2) A sufferer of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) who is deathly afraid of knives is repeatedly confronted with knives by a psychotherapist. As the patient is exposed to more and more knives, eventually her mind becomes quiescent with regard to knives, and she no longer takes cognizance of the fact that the knives are present. But once the OCD sufferer's power of resistance has returned (say, the next day), her mind may again produce anxiety with regard to knives, but that anxiety will hopefully be less than the previous anxiety (Foa and Wilson 2001: 131-136).

Since one cannot run away from God, God, in continuing to provide his saving grace, is like the parent who persists in saying that the child cannot have the toy or like the psychotherapist who persists in subjecting the OCD sufferer to the feared object. All that is required is that the totally depraved person possess the mental faculty to receive God's grace. The person who has blasphemed against the Holy Spirit is akin to the OCD sufferer who deliberately makes it impossible to have any further contact with the feared object, such that the fear of the object never subsides. But unless one blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, the totally depraved person's power of resistance against saving grace will eventually be spent (assuming her continued earthly life), and she will not even realize its presence, such that it does not occur to her to resist it. During these moments of involuntary quiescence, God's saving grace is effective. Christians often look back at moments

in their pre-Christian lives and say, ‘God’s grace was working in my life then, and I did not realize it.’

Here we shall return to my earlier suggestion that the period of one’s quiescence may be momentary, such that God’s saving grace works faith in the person instantaneously, or it may be extensive, such that God’s saving grace works faith in the person after a potentially discontinuous span of time. Why the difference? I submit that the level of severity with which one resists saving grace causes proportional damage to, but not destruction of, a particular capacity of the soul. This capacity is part of the mental faculty which receives God’s saving grace. It is the capacity to receive justifying faith, which is included in the ‘package’ of saving grace. The only way the capacity to receive justifying faith may be destroyed is if the mental faculty of which it is a part—the mental faculty to receive God’s saving grace—is destroyed through blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But the capacity to receive justifying faith is harmed by resistance of saving grace. Saving grace, therefore, both heals this capacity so that it can again receive justifying faith and, at the moment of its restoration, produces justifying faith. Thus, the amount, and length of time under the effect of, saving grace that one needs before her soul’s capacity to receive justifying faith is restored to health varies from person to person, depending on the person’s freely chosen levels of resistance to such grace when cognizant of its presence. Assuming the length of time is extensive, it will likely be discontinuous. For at some point in any extensive process, the person’s totally depraved nature will again generate the power of resistance. During the ensuing inevitable resistance, the person will undo some to all of the healing work of saving grace based on how mildly or zealously she then resists it, so causing lesser or greater damage to her soul’s capacity to receive justifying faith.

### **The Indispensability of Molinism to My Account**

We have already posited that all actual persons are totally depraved prior to salvation and possess soft libertarian freedom. In order for God to ensure the salvation of all such persons who do not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, it seems that God must be endowed with middle knowledge, or prevolitional knowledge of all counterfactuals, including counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (CCFs). In particular, for any possible person P, God must be apprised of at least the following five categories of counterfactuals:

- (1) Counterfactuals concerning what level of resistance toward God’s saving grace would be freely willed by P in any set of circumstances
- (2) Counterfactuals concerning the damage that every level of resistance would do to P’s capacity to receive justifying faith

- (3) Counterfactuals concerning the moments of P's involuntary quiescence toward God's saving grace, including when these moments would occur and their lengths
- (4) Counterfactuals concerning the circumstances, if any, under which P would blaspheme against the Holy Spirit
- (5) Counterfactuals concerning the circumstances under which P would die.

By virtue of these categories, God knows the dizzying conjunction of circumstances (if there exists such a conjunction) under which the potentially lengthy back-and-forth between, on the one hand, P's various freely willed levels of resistance of saving grace and the damage these levels cause P and, on the other hand, the operation of saving grace during moments of quiescence, eventuate in P's salvation before P's death. Of course, for some persons there may not be such a conjunction, because they would in every set of circumstances blaspheme against the Holy Spirit before receiving salvation.

Suppose there are some combinations of circumstances where a person does not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and receives salvation, and there are other combinations of circumstances where that same person blasphemes against the Holy Spirit and is damned. In his love, God will so providentially order the world through his middle knowledge that the person is placed in a non-blaspheming combination of circumstances. Through his middle knowledge, God thus sees to it that the only people who are lost in the actual world are people who would, in every combination of circumstances, blaspheme against the Holy Spirit before receiving salvation. Such people suffer from what Craig calls 'transworld damnation' (Craig 1989: 184). [I do not subscribe to the doctrine of transworld damnation (MacGregor 2007: 68-69), and neither did Molina (MacGregor 2015: 146-148). But the doctrine has utility for the present account.]

At this juncture one may query: why does God not simply refrain from creating persons who suffer from transworld damnation? The present account contends with Craig that in light of certain true CCFs, it is not feasible for God to create a world without anyone who suffers from transworld damnation. For certain individuals may omit blaspheming against the Holy Spirit only in a world containing other persons who do blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Thus, a person who would otherwise blaspheme against the Holy Spirit might see the deleterious consequences of such abject rejection of God on the part of the transworld damned and so refrain from such permanent hardness of heart, only temporarily hardening her heart instead. Other individuals who omit blaspheming against the Holy Spirit may only exist in worlds containing Spirit-blasphemers. For a person ultimately saved by God may have parents, grandparents, or other relatives who are

transworld damned, such that (assuming a traducian view of the soul) the person would not exist without the transworld damned.

The present account stipulates with Craig that God has created a world featuring an optimal balance between saved and lost, containing no more of the transworld damned than are necessary to accomplish the maximum number of the saved. The account thus posits that the following statements of possibility offered by Craig are, in fact, actual:

It is possible that in order to create the actual number of persons who will be saved, God had to create the actual number of persons who will be lost. It is possible that the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell and that in any other possible world which was feasible for God the balance between saved and lost was worse. It is possible that had God actualized a world in which there are less persons in hell, there would also have been less persons in heaven. It is possible that in order to achieve this much blessedness, God was forced to accept this much loss... It is possible that in order to achieve a multitude of saints, God had to accept an even greater multitude of sinners (Craig 1989: 183).

Moreover, those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit in every set of circumstances should not be allowed to have a sort of veto power over which world an all-loving God is free to create, thereby preventing him from creating as many people as possible who would receive eternal blessedness and happiness.

If God possesses middle knowledge, then it is possible for God to create a world obtaining to optimal salvation where all persons, before salvation, are totally depraved and yet possess soft libertarian freedom to choose anything on the spectrum compatible with their nature at any given point. Everyone who does not actually blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is eventually given justifying faith by God and thus salvation. Each of the recipients of salvation either would not have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit in any circumstances or would have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit only in some, but not all, circumstances. For those in the latter category, God uses his middle knowledge to order the world so that the blaspheming circumstances do not materialize. The only people lost are the transworld damned, who would blaspheme against the Holy Spirit in every feasible world and so commit this intrinsically heinous atrocity in the actual world. So, the lost cannot legitimately say to God on the judgement day, 'Alright, God. So, I blasphemed against the Spirit. But if I'd been placed in other circumstances, then I wouldn't have blasphemed.' For God would reply, 'No, I knew that in any possible combination of circumstances, you would have blasphemed against the Spirit. Therefore, your self-imposed condemnation is entirely just.' Given middle knowledge, then, God's omnibenevolence is safeguarded in that any actual person who would omit blaspheming against

the Holy Spirit in any feasible world will be saved, and the actual world obtains to an optimal salvific balance.

However, if God lacks middle knowledge, it immediately becomes apparent that God cannot guarantee either the salvation of all actual persons who would not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit under any circumstances or the salvation of all actual persons who would in some circumstances omit blaspheming against the Holy Spirit but who would in other circumstances blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. For those who would not blaspheme under any circumstances, it becomes simply a matter of luck whether or not they would receive salvation before death. Without the counterfactual knowledge delineated in categories (1), (2), (3), and (5), God cannot guarantee that the circumstances surrounding the back-and-forth between a person's choosing various levels of resisting saving grace (so damaging the soul's capacity to receive the gift of justifying faith to a greater or lesser degree) and becoming involuntarily quiescent to saving grace (during which this faith reception capacity is gradually healed) would eventuate in the person's receiving saving faith. Thus, it becomes likely that some such persons would find themselves damned. For those who would blaspheme against the Holy Spirit in some but not all circumstances, the chances are even slimmer that they receive salvation. Without the counterfactual knowledge delineated in category (4), God could not prevent such persons from blaspheming against the Holy Spirit without violating their soft libertarian freedom. Thus, it becomes highly probable that many such persons would be damned.

Hence the salvation or damnation of all except for the transworld damned would simply be a matter of circumstantial accident; under different circumstances, their eternal destiny would have turned out oppositely. Thus, any of the damned who would not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit under any circumstances could rightly indict Christ at the last judgment: 'You promised in Mark 3:28-29 that all my sins would be forgiven, which could only occur if I received salvation. But I never did. You liar!' And any of the damned who would blaspheme against the Holy Spirit under some but not all circumstances could justifiably complain to God, 'If I had been placed in other circumstances, I wouldn't have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. Didn't you love me enough to put me in those circumstances?' Furthermore, given the fact that the aforementioned persons have soft libertarian freedom, without middle knowledge God would not even know if the charges of these persons were true—he would simply have to hope that they were not. As a result of all this, it would be highly improbable that the actual world obtained to an optimal salvific balance. Thus, God's omnibenevolence, not to mention his veracity and omniscience, would be severely

compromised if God attempted to implement the account I have proposed in the absence of middle knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

With very rare exceptions (to my knowledge only the work of Keathley), Molinism is used in the employ of synergistic models of salvation. But my article demonstrates that this need not be the case. In fact, Molinism furnishes the overarching conceptual framework for a fully monergistic account of salvation that, perhaps unlike earlier attempts, wards off the semi-Pelagian worry in a manner consistent with Reformed theology. According to this account, God uses his middle knowledge to guarantee that all persons in the actual world who unmeritoriously omit blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, opting instead to commit the lesser evil of temporarily hardening their hearts against God, will ultimately be given justifying grace by God. When justifying grace is given, it never crosses such persons' minds to resist it, so rendering their quiescence involuntary and therefore unmeritorious. Indeed, persons who are not Spirit-blasphemers do not deserve praise for any act in the sequence of events culminating in their salvation, as all such acts are either sinful or involuntary. Employing his middle knowledge, God orders the actual world in such a way that anyone who would omit Spirit-blasphemy in any but not every feasible world omit Spirit-blasphemy in the actual world. God also sees to it that the only persons in the actual world who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and are eternally lost would commit Spirit-blasphemy in every feasible world and so suffer from transworld damnation. Through his middle knowledge, God ensures that the actual world obtains to the optimal salvific balance, so rendering the transworld damned and not God responsible for soteriological evil. The vitriol that many non-Christians exhibit toward God makes the notion that Spirit-blasphemy, or irrevocable rejection of God as absolute evil, occurs on a regular basis an eminently plausible one. Accordingly, my proposal may constitute the first fully tenable account of monergistic Molinism.

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