

## Paper 2: Against Middle Knowledge

Middle Knowledge is the theological attempt to reconcile God's foreknowledge with the existence of free will through the incorporation of deliberative conditionals, otherwise known as Counterfactuals of Creaturely Freedom, such that God knows what action a free agent would perform under certain circumstances in the form of "If X occurs, then Y will freely perform Z" (Crow, 2020, p.18).<sup>1</sup> Middle Knowledge is also understood as standing between Natural Knowledge, which involves necessary truths independent of God's will, and Free Knowledge, which involves contingent truths dependent upon God's will, insofar as its truths are contingent but independent of God's will.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I shall argue against the coherence of Middle Knowledge, stating that the assumption of Deliberative Conditionals entails that possible worlds are without indeterminacy, and that such determinacy of facts about possible worlds makes truths necessary prior to their instantiation, thus rendering God the truthmaker of all contingent facts. If God's knowledge is prior to the events of the actual world, then such instantiated events could not have been otherwise, thereby undermining free will.

Under the libertarian account of free will (LFW), an action is freely performed if it is solely determined by the agent performing it. If an agent cannot do otherwise, such that all future actions are determined in any regard, then under this account such actions

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<sup>1</sup> Crow, IV, F. W. (2020). The False Appeal of Middle Knowledge: A Critique of Alvin Plantinga's Commitment to Counterfactuals of Freedom [Master's thesis, Ohio University]. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ohiou159183292305403](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ohiou159183292305403)

<sup>2</sup> Middle Knowledge | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). <https://iep.utm.edu/middlekn/>

would be unfree.<sup>3</sup> If free actions require the indeterminacy of the future, then God's foreknowledge threatens to undermine libertarian freedom given that knowledge of the future entails its determinacy, for an indeterminate future would prevent God from being able to foreknow anything. Although the future appears to us as presently non-existent, nothing could be indeterminate from the perspective of He who beholds everything in an eternal present with perfect omniscience. When the defender of LFW utilizes Counterfactuals of Creaturely Freedom (CCF), they neglect to consider that these possibilities can only be validly held by us, for whom the future is indeterminate, but not for the God that has exclusive power over which world to make actual (or which set of contingent truths to actualize).

A further consequence of foreknowledge is the reversal of truthmaking/grounding; if God's knowledge of the actions committed by free agents is prior to their occurrence, per CCF, then free agents cannot be said to ground their actions nor be considered proper truthmakers of them, for the truth-values of the world in which free agents reside are determinate prior to their existence within the world. Put differently, either God's knowledge of the actions committed by His creatures is contingent upon their actual occurrence, such that His knowledge comes after the fact (which is doubtful given that the actual world is determinate, being the actualization of a particular possible world, meaning the temporal unfolding of events is not a necessary condition for God's knowledge), or God alone is the truthmaker of contingent facts, meaning we can only do otherwise than what God believes us to do in similar possible worlds, but with regards to

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<sup>3</sup> Free Will (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). (2022, November 3). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/>

the actual world we are wholly unfree to act contrary to God's beliefs. If God believes that someone will perform a specific action due to the circumstances that He made actual, then given the determinate truth-values of deliberative conditionals it is not within the power of a person to act contrary to what God ordained, for otherwise He would hold a false belief, which is impossible.<sup>4</sup> If it be denied that people cannot act contrary to God's beliefs given possibly existent counterfactuals, it should be noted that God's beliefs about the actual world relate specifically *to* the actual world, and not the alternative truth-values concerning the actual world (as a possible world) within non-existent possible worlds; since God actualizes whatever world He so desires, the truth-values of the actual world holds supremacy above the truth-values of the merely possible worlds that He chose to invalidate through His selection for the actual world, making such counterfactuals irrelevant and arbitrary. If it be denied that the truth-values of deliberative conditionals are determinate, then Middle Knowledge would be functionally useless. All that would be available to Him is what a free agent might probably do in some circumstances (whether potential or actual), which implies that God could hold false beliefs or instead that He gains knowledge through the temporal unfolding of the actual world, which undermines the point about CCF being existent prior to actually occurring events. Even if God's knowledge is not prior to the actions of creatures (which conflicts with His perfect omniscience, for it is inconsistent to assert that God was less omniscient prior to creation than after the act), the fact that only one world is actual and that the future is determinate from God's atemporal perspective entails the inability for free agents to do otherwise, so either the determinacy of the

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<sup>4</sup> Foreknowledge and Free Will (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). (2021b, November 2). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/>

future must be rejected, which would make it impossible for God to possess foreknowledge and knowledge of deliberative conditionals, or it must be maintained, such that libertarian freedom is abandoned given its inconsistency with Middle Knowledge.

Although Middle Knowledge appears to solve the initial problem between free will and foreknowledge in making CCF prior to God's act of creation and independent of God's will, such that God does not personally determine the actions of any free agents, this still fails to account for God's role in choosing which world is made actual, as I noted above. If God can discern possible worlds from actual worlds, and if the actual world is chosen by the omniscient God, then there cannot be any indeterminacy of future events, for the truths about the actual world are true in virtue of God's decision in choosing which world to make actual, thus making God the truthmaker of contingent facts. Although there exists possible worlds in which the creatures of the actual world acted otherwise than they really did, that does not make their actions free if their actions were nonetheless determined by something prior to them; just because it is possible that things could have been otherwise had a different world been made actual does not thereby grant contingent beings freedom, for things could only be otherwise if God made it so. To simplify this argument, defenders of Middle Knowledge often believe that CCF have determinate truth-values and are known to God prior to creation, and that God utilizes such knowledge of deliberative conditionals in choosing which world to make actual. If God selectively chooses among the infinitely many possible worlds, with their differing truth-values, which one to actualize, then whatever actions are chosen by free agents are causally dependent upon God's choice (for they could not exist

otherwise) and thus necessitated given the impossibility for Him to hold false beliefs from His eternal present, in which all temporal actions are concurrently existent. Having eliminated the possibility for Middle Knowledge to exist alongside the LFW of creatures, could a Compatibilist account of free will resolve this problem?

Under a Compatibilist account, free will can be held alongside the many varieties of Determinism. However, it is unclear whether moral responsibility can exist if Middle Knowledge is maintained. Firstly, CCF strongly implies that the truth-values of what a free agent would do in some set of circumstances are fixed prior to the occurrence of those circumstances. Secondly, God's role in actualizing a possible world makes its truth-values necessary, for the counterfactuals of possible worlds do not have any causal connection to the actual world since their truth-values were invalidated upon creation; whatever God believes regarding the actual world cannot fail to obtain. Having already defended these two points, let us suppose that they be granted. Those that uphold religious notions of moral responsibility typically believe in the Control Principle, which states that moral status is contingent upon the degree of control a moral agent possesses, and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, which states that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise.<sup>56</sup> It is questionable to ascribe control to someone that lacks the logical possibility of going against the will of God and undoubtedly incoherent to maintain PAP while also believing that God alone has the exclusive ability to actualize alternative possibilities. If it be objected that, per CCF, the actions of a free agent in some set of circumstances are independent of God's will and

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<sup>5</sup> Moral Luck (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). (2019b, April 19). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-luck/>

<sup>6</sup> Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). (2020, July 9). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alternative-possibilities/>

that He merely allowed that the actions take place, the creature nonetheless lacked control over the circumstances that God willed and, per CCF, did not ground their actions if the deliberative conditionals had determinate truth-values prior to their existence. If the defender of Middle Knowledge is to be consistent with their position, then they cannot hold the Control Principle nor the PAP, but without these principles the grounds upon which objective moral judgements could be upheld would be drastically diminished. If the difference between a morally good person and a morally evil one is arbitrary, since both acted according to the same divine necessity (and so could not have done otherwise), what remains is a Calvinist position, in which one ought to suspend disbelief and believe that God's judgment cannot be subject to rational scrutiny, but this option is unappealing to most Christians and explanatorily weak. The Christian would be better off rejecting Middle Knowledge due to the undermining of free will and moral responsibility, and since these concepts are ingrained within the theology of mainstream Christianity (Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy), the choice that must be made is rather obvious.

Middle Knowledge is ultimately an indefensible position to maintain since the truth-values of the Counterfactuals of Creaturely Freedom are determinate prior to the actual occurrence of the content of such counterfactuals, and only God can actualize different states of affairs given the exclusive power He maintains over creation. Middle Knowledge is functionally useless without conceding that the truth-values of CCF are determinate, and if it is the case that God utilizes knowledge of deliberative conditionals in choosing which world or set of contingent truths to make actual, then creatures are unfree since what God believes regarding the actual world must obtain (for He grounds

such truths). If it is not within the power of creatures in the actual world to act contrary to the will of God, then they cannot be subject to the Control Principle nor the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, thereby implying a lack of moral responsibility within the framework normally held by non-Calvinist Christians. In brief, Middle Knowledge conflicts with the core Christian belief concerning the moral responsibility of individuals, which is only possible if we have freedom, and as argued in this paper, creatures cannot be genuinely free agents if the truth of Middle Knowledge is assumed.

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**Biography:**

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