

Discussione

Re-assessing the legacy of Luis de Molina

A brief Commentary on Kirk R. MacGregor's
*Luis de Molina: the life and theology of the
Founder of Middle Knowledge*

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Macgregor's monograph on the scholastic theologian Luis de Molina (1535-1600) and his thought offers ample testimony of the revival – especially since the 1980s - of scholarly interest on the Spanish Jesuit as a major ecumenical philosopher of God's omniscience and the problem of moral freedom. In particular, it offers testimony of the enduring interest of his famous thesis of "middle knowledge", which allows for God's foreknowledge of counterfactuals in relation to the free choice of all human beings in the face of their acceptance or the their rejection of faith. Middle knowledge stands logically (not temporally) between God's "natural" knowledge of necessary truths and his "free" knowledge of actual contingencies in the created world. Hence, logically previous to God creating this particular world, he knew the full range of possibilities involving all human moral choices in all contingencies, in a kind of virtual series of parallel (but feasible) worlds. Molina's *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione Concordia* (Lisbon, 1588) represents one of the major efforts in the history of western theology to make God's omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence, and in particular the doctrine of salvation through efficacious grace, compatible with an idea of human moral freedom that is not illusory (what is conventionally known as libertarian freedom).

Especially remarkable is the extent to which a major Catholic Counter Reformation thinker associated with Jesuit theological "innovations" (as fiercely

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denounced by his Dominican opponents) has become a champion not only of modern Catholicism, especially post-Vatican II, but also, as made clear by MacGregor, of many evangelical theologians confronting the problem of how to conceptualize free will, and seeking a libertarian account of human choices not incompatible with full providential theism. Molina was motivated to counter the Protestant doctrines of election proposed by Luther and Calvin (the idea that all human choices, and in particular those bearing on individual faith and salvation, were necessary by the will of God) whilst avoiding the dangers of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism (that humans can, through their own moral efforts, “earn” their salvation), and he did so, MacGregor argues, by moving away from Aquinas on some specific but important philosophical points, such as the idea that God is, as pure actuality, the determining cause of all that occurs, or his understanding of divine grace as a kind of helping substance, rather than (as Molina argued) a divinely engendered, or restored, disposition of the soul. Molina did so primarily on a fresh and original reading of both Aristotle, as taught at Coimbra by fellow Jesuit Pedro da Fonseca, and Scripture, including Paul’s letter to Romans, which of course is central to the reformed understanding of grace and salvation. One of the aspects that emerge from MacGregor’s analysis is how carefully Molina read both the Old and New Testaments (with an emphasis on literal interpretations). On the other hand, as João Rebalde has recently shown in his *Liberdade Humana e perfeição divina na ‘Concordia’ de Luís de Molina* (2015) - a major study of Molina that MacGregor was not able to use - the analysis of “middle knowledge” should not be understood as an individual doctrine of Molina developed at Évora in the 1570s, but rather a product of the Jesuit College of Coimbra in the 1560s, and hence it was also taught by others, such as Fonseca.

It is important to note that in order to preserve the salvific efficacy of divine grace - a crucial concern of many Christian theologians after Augustine - Molina did not actually deny that by creating this particular world God predestined some individuals, but not others, to salvation. However, he argued that he did so whilst preserving fully the dignity of human choice, by previously considering all the possible worlds in which all individuals made different choices, or perhaps did not even exist. This insistence on predestination brought him in some ways closer to Calvin than many other Catholic theologians after Trent felt comfortable with, and he was criticised from within his own order - by men like Juan de Mariana - for this reason: as far as they were concerned, Molina was adopting a version of unconditional election. This was a very different kind of criticism than the one he faced from Dominicans like Domingo Báñez, who (in a more Augustinian vein) were instead concerned that Molina’s account of salvation detracted from the intrinsic efficacy of divine grace and made God passive. Thus, keeping close to Aquinas’s definition of God as pure act, of His will as the final cause of everything, Báñez argued that God “pre-moves” humans to act in particular ways. From an equivalent critical angle, the Molinist doctrine was often (but also simplistically, MacGregor insists) associated with

Arminianism, notably by Calvinist and Jansenist theologians concerned with avoiding the Pelagian heresy.

In any case, Molina's ultimate aim was explicitly to counter both Luther and Calvin by clarifying a problem that the Council of Trent had not fully solved, how to preserve human moral responsibility as free creatures without abrogating the efficacy of divine grace, and he did so by making the efficacy of grace neutral in the face of various possibilities, rather than intrinsic and therefore deterministic. In other words, he placed human choices not within, nor against, God's omnipotence and providence, but somewhere beyond it. In that way God foreknows, but does not condition or pre-determine, individual choices, even though he knowingly creates the particular world where they occur. How an omnipotent and benevolent God could "choose" to actualize one world where some people, let us say Esau, but not others, let us say Jacob, "freely" failed the test of faith and made the wrong choice is arguably one of the murkiest aspects of Molinism. Although it is important to acknowledge that many philosophers do not find Molinism logically coherent, it is nonetheless noteworthy that a scholastic system devised to safeguard the full dignity of moral human freedom, as well as God's benevolence towards all human being, but which the Catholic Church hesitated to embrace in his own time, should become so central today. This is in part because Molina's analysis of God's omniscience (including his "middle knowledge") was extremely sophisticated. Here Macgregor notes that the Spanish Jesuit's understanding of divine knowledge of all possible contingencies was conceptualist rather than perceptualist: God does not know the random contingencies of all possible worlds as an infinite spectator who "sees" everything, but through an absolute knowledge of all individual essences by his own nature. As we have noted, he also does it atemporally, albeit in a logical order that places such knowledge as a step previous to the act of creation.

No doubt the renewed relevance of Molina's doctrine of middle knowledge is related to the prominence of the philosophical debate about the problem of evil in any theistic context that asserts the divine omnipotence and omniscience of a creator God, otherwise known as the problem of theodicy. As MacGregor explains, the connection has been recognized by philosophers and theologians such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig. But by considering Molina holistically, MacGregor is also able to also emphasize how innovative his practical theology was, albeit perhaps less influential in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it deserved to be. In particular, he shows that Molina was consistently driven by the idea that salvation was universally available, including in natural law through implicit faith, thus adopting a liberal position on the salvation of virtuous gentiles. Not least interesting is his denunciation of the abuse of the scholastic justification of African slavery on the grounds of "just war", which, as far as he could ascertain, simply did not apply to the facts of the case. MacGregor's interpretation often places Molina as teaching a *via media* between Catholic tradition and some of the concerns expressed by reformers, not only as a theologian, but also as a pastor working within the Church and

addressing in a plain manner those moral issues that concerned his immediate community in Spain, notably his native Cuenca. For example, when discussing how to hold private property and assist the poor, Molina usually leant towards placing obligations upon the better off whilst giving opportunities to the poor, whose right to travel should not be questioned. His ideas about money were also remarkably modern.

MacGregor's book is to be highly commended for the clarity of exposition of difficult theological arguments and debates. It is also notable for the attempt to offer a comprehensive account of Molina's life and his intellectual work, including his often remarkable social and political doctrines. The editorial claim that MacGregor's book "is the first full-length work ever published on this seminal thinker" on the other hand feels exaggerated. Although it is true that full monographs on Molina are scant, Macgregor often, and rightly, relies on previous work by many scholars, including Alfred Freddoso on middle knowledge, Guido Stucco and Antonio Astraín on the Roman congregation *De Auxiliis Gratiae*, Diego Alonso-Lasheras on Molina's social thought, Frank Costello on his political views, and more generally John Noonan on usury, John Hardon on the Catholic doctrine of Grace, and David Brion Davies on the problem of slavery in western culture. (Other important works, such as the 2014 *Companion to Luis de Molina* edited by Matthias Kaufmann and Alexander Aichele, seem not to have been available to the author at the time of writing). No least problematic is MacGregor's claim that he offers a new account of the life of Molina on the basis of a return to sixteenth-century primary sources, many of which remain in manuscript. There is precious little evidence that this is the case in the book's footnotes – certainly, published sources of the seventeenth century, such as Alonso de Andrade's series of Jesuit hagiographies, *Varones Ilustres de la Compañía de Jesús* (1666), which is not always reliable, do not correspond to this description. In reality, whilst offering a detailed, nuanced and fair-minded summary of Molina's philosophical doctrines, the book is, on the substance of the information it offers, less innovative than claimed. It is nonetheless extremely valuable, not only for its comprehensiveness and clarity of exposition, but also for the effort to target particular misconceptions. Perhaps the most significant of these (especially for the evangelical audience it seeks to address) is the reduction of Arminianism to Molinism: the differences, Macgregor argues, are subtle but significant, and the latter is far more sophisticated.

MacGregor, writing from a committed faith position, displays an obvious sympathy for its subject, and for those who have only encountered "Molinism" as a technical doctrine within complex neo-scholastic debate, his focus on Molina's biography is particularly enriching. His account of the Jesuit's end in Madrid in 1600 is especially moving. Frustrated by his inability to defend himself in Rome, by the misrepresentation of his doctrine by hostile Dominican critics, and by the equivocations of the Jesuit general Claudio Aquaviva, who was in charge of his defence (Aquaviva preferred to champion the "congruism" of Francisco Suárez to Molina's understanding of predestination, because it made the gift of

divine grace emphatically infallible), Molina died under the impending threat of having his views condemned as heretical. Wisely, but too late for him, the Roman popes Clement VIII (tentatively) and Paul V (decisively) in the end decided to avoid pronouncing on a complex issue that elicited no easy consensus, and allowed both Molinism and its Dominican alternative to be taught within their respective orders, albeit discreetly, without a public confrontation. This was the same approach that Rome initially almost adopted, but failed to sustain, when confronted with Galileo's heliocentric theory some thirty years later.