Mark B. Wiebe. *On Evil, Providence, and Freedom: A New Reading of Molina.* DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017. 180 pp. $45 (hbk).

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Luis de Molina's *Concordia* (*The Compatibility of Free Choice with the Gifts of Grace, Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Reprobation*) is perhaps one of the most debated theological treatises in Church history. As its title suggests, Molina's main aim in this work, very roughly, is to reconcile the doctrines of foreknowledge, providence, and predestination on the one hand, with creaturely contingency and freedom, on the other hand. The work was first published in 1588, and Molina's suggestion, relying on the distinction between God's pre-volitional knowledge, middle knowledge, and free knowledge, generated a debate so heated that after a while the Holy See had to intervene, asking the various parties to calm down and forbidding them to call each other heretics.[1] Mark B. Wiebe's book aims both to enter into this debate, defending what he sees as Molina's position, and to introduce it to theologians and philosophers who are concerned with the same perennial problem of how to reconcile divine foreknowledge with human free will. Wiebe's project is undeniably very ambitious: on the way, he attempts to defend not only Molina's view of foreknowledge but also a specific view of libertarian free will and a specific answer to the problem of evil. And, as he puts it, although the book aims to be, primarily, "a novel contribution to the field of Analytic Theology," it also aims "to bridge several of the pivotal theological and philosophical conversations relating to Molinism" (2). The book is not without merits, but as will be shown below, it does not quite achieve these goals.

The book is divided into four chapters. In the first, longest chapter, Wiebe offers some introductory explanation of the problems of grace, free will, and predestination, and gives an outline of various competing theories meant to deal with these problems. In the second chapter, we see a more detailed comparison of Aquinas's and Molina's view on divine foreknowledge and providence, while the third chapter moves onto some objections against the latter and responds to these objections. Finally, the fourth chapter argues that Molina's view on foreknowledge is the best available view to account for (some version of) libertarian free will as well as to answer the problem of evil. In what follows, I will say more about each of these chapters, calling attention to a few general strengths and weaknesses of Wiebe's

[1] The still most helpful discussion of the relevant portion of the work is Alfred Freddoso's Introduction in Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia,* tr. and introduction Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

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treatment of the relevant issues.

The first chapter, “Molina and the Battle over Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom,” starts out by giving some background to understand the debate at hand. As Wiebe notes, the main source of the Molinist controversy was a great emphasis on a libertarian notion of free will together with an insistence that God’s grace is necessary for salvation. Wiebe then turns to some details of what one might expect of a philosophically coherent as well as theologically orthodox theory of providence. The theory has to fit well with Scripture and tradition, according to which (i) God’s existence is necessary, (ii) creation is contingent, (iii) God has detailed knowledge of the world’s past, present, and future, and (iv) God is also a preserver and ultimate final cause of the created world. As Wiebe argues, these desiderata cannot be met by competing theories of foreknowledge, such as Boethianism, Ockhamism, and Open Theism.

Although this first chapter might help the reader in several respects, the introduction of the various concepts and theories is often somewhat superficial. Thus, Wiebe does not make a distinction between the questions of foreknowledge, providence, and grace as related to free will: the first dealing with how God knows contingent future events of the created order, the second concerning how God governs or guides this same order, while the third dealing with how we can preserve responsibility while maintaining that one cannot perform good acts without divine grace. Although the questions of how to attribute free will to created agents arise in all these contexts, and it might also turn out that they have the same answer, nevertheless the problems are, at least *prima facie*, distinct. Wiebe also regards responsibility and libertarian freedom as interchangeable notions. Although the Biblical passages he cites do suggest that human agents are justly punished and hence arguably responsible for their sinful actions, they tend to say very little about whether this is the case *because* those agents were free in these actions – let alone that they had the ability to do otherwise. Wiebe tends to treat these questions together here and in the later chapters as well. Finally, on a more historical note, the historian of medieval theology or philosophy will be likely struck by the way Wiebe uses labels such as ‘Molinism,’ ‘Boethianism,’ ‘Ockhamism,’ or even ‘Nominalism’ (equating the latter two), and describes them, without citing any primary sources, as if they had been invariably held by students of Molina, Boethius, or Ockham, respectively. Consequently, there are some conclusions that are drawn a bit hastily about these theories. For instance, about Molina, Wiebe notes that “there was nothing substantially new in Molina’s work” (11), citing Blaise Romeyer’s paper from 1942;[2] the date of publication of course does not subtract from a paper’s philosophical quality, but does cast at least some doubts upon its comparative conclusions simply because of the limited availability of the medieval philosophical and theological material at the time. All in all, it might have been helpful to signal to the reader that the terms ‘Boethianism,’ ‘Molinism,’ etc. are meant to be generic labels of certain systematic theological options rather than referring to the theories actually held by their eponyms.

The second chapter, “The Concord of Grace and Free Will: Thomas Aquinas and

[2] Blaise Romeyer, “Libre Arbitre et Concours Selon Molina,” *Gregorianum* 23:2 (1942), 169-201.

Luis de Molina on God's Nature and Providence," provides a comparative analysis of Aquinas's and Molina's accounts of foreknowledge and providence (with the caveat noted above that these problems are not distinguished and thus the presentation shifts back and forth between them quite regularly). First, some interpreters suggest that Aquinas explains God's knowledge of the world in causal terms: that is, God knows creatures because he causes them to exist. As Wiebe argues, this interpretation cannot be entirely correct, since it cannot account for God's knowledge of evil and of free actions. Elaborating on the latter, Wiebe notes that while for Aquinas, God is the source of the capacity of action in all things, this does not mean that God is causally active in performing these actions – simply because actions do not have the same ontological status as do entities like Socrates or Plato. Since, therefore, actions are not caused by God, created agents remain ultimately responsible for them. Wiebe further supports his view by referring to Eleonore Stump's notion of quiescence, and argues that although it is a helpful notion in dealing with the problem of evil, it is less helpful for Aquinas than it would be for Molina. The chapter then turns to a brief discussion of Molina's view on foreknowledge, arguing that only middle knowledge can explain how God knows about the quiescent states of the will.

Apart from some problems similar to the previous chapter, there are a few issues that are worth pointing out with respect to Aquinas's theory of God's knowledge and – since Wiebe decided to also treat this issue here – divine concurrence with created agents. Regarding the former, Wiebe claims that Aquinas cannot hold that God knows free actions by causing them because God is not a cause of these actions to start with. But this is mistaken. First of all, in his commentary on the *Sentences*, Aquinas explicitly states that "God's knowledge is, invariably, the cause of everything," after which he goes on to answer several objections dealing with worries similar to Wiebe's.[3] One of these worries concerns sinful actions, about which Aquinas later notes that God *is* their cause, at least insofar as they are actions (but not insofar as they are sinful).[4] In claiming this, Aquinas in fact agrees with most of his contemporaries, who often argue that God is causally active even in sinful actions precisely on the ground that otherwise God would not have any knowledge of these actions.[5] Second, concerning the problem of concurrence, Wiebe does not present Aquinas's most developed treatment of this issue,[6] fails to explain *how* concurrence occurs, and also mistakenly attributes to Aquinas the view that God is a formal but not an efficient cause of the effects of created causes. Wiebe's treatment of Aquinas's position is based on Lonergan's treatment of the same, which does not always achieve conceptual clarity or historical exactness. Finally, regarding Molina, if the reader does not know Molina's view of divine foreknowledge and providence already, she will find little help in Wiebe's two-page treatment. Although this is the theory Wiebe will ultimately defend, his explanation is conceptually unclear (e.g., equating 'future contingents' with 'counterfactuals of creaturely freedom' on p. 81, or failing to define

[3] *In Sent.* I, d. 37, q. 1, a. 4.

[4] *In Sent.* II, d. 37, q. 2, a. 2.

[5] For one of the most elaborate medieval treatments of this argument, see Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, dd. 34–37, q. 5. But again, apart from some details, Scotus is not original in the main claim of this discussion.

[6] *De potentia dei,* q. 3, a. 7.

what 'free knowledge,' 'natural knowledge,' or 'middle knowledge' is), with citations taken from Garrigou-Lagrange's somewhat outdated and not always very illuminating commentary.

The third chapter, "Anti-Molinism," addresses four objections that are commonly brought up against Molina's view of middle knowledge. According to the first one, raised, characteristically, by Thomists, Molina's view is Pelagian or at least semi-Pelagian, and as such, threatens divine sovereignty. As a response, Wiebe argues that the prevolitional truth of creaturely counterfactuals no more threatens divine sovereignty than the prevolitional truth of necessary logical principles does. That is, both the necessary propositions of logic and the propositions of middle knowledge are true independently of God's will, but since they are true independently of creaturely will as well, they do not imply that creaturely will is sufficient for initiating faith or salvation, as the semi-Pelagian or the Pelagian would have it. (Of course, maintaining that creaturely counterfactuals are true independently of creaturely will immediately raises the question of how, or *in virtue of what*, they are true precisely; this question will be discussed in objection four below.)

According to the second objection, raised by Robert Adams and William Hasker, creaturely counterfactuals are either incoherent or destroy genuine agency, for the simple reason that their truth value cannot depend on the created agent (they are true or false when the created agent does not yet exist). As Wiebe argues, however, this worry adds nothing more to the grounding objection, which will be answered later in the chapter.

The third objection originates from Dean Zimmerman, who argues that Molinism entails that there are feasible worlds that God could have created where every decision of every free agent would be good (in Zimmerman's terminology, there are feasible voodoo worlds). If this is the case, however, then it is difficult for the Molinist to explain why God did not create that world. (This is only part of Zimmerman's original argument, which also aims to show that Molinism entails the possibility of a world where creatures do not have libertarian freedom – and consequently, that creaturely counterfactuals do not guarantee libertarian freedom. Wiebe does not address this part of the argument.) Wiebe's response to this objection is manifold, arguing that Molinism is only meant to give a negative response to the problem of evil as opposed to a positive one, while also pointing out that the basic assertion of the objection – that voodoo worlds are indeed feasible worlds – begs the question against the Molinist by assuming that creaturely counterfactuals are not brute facts. Wiebe's point seems to be that in a voodoo world, God has total – if remote – control over his creatures by manipulating very distant, non-deterministic causes. In this case, however, it might seem that what creatures would freely choose in a voodoo world would depend on or could be explained by those remote causes – in other words, creaturely counterfactuals would not be brute facts.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Wiebe deals with the grounding objection – that is, the question of what grounds the (prevolitional) truth value of creaturely counterfactuals. Wiebe's treatment is based on Plantinga's treatment of the same, and aims to show that creaturely counterfactuals are not grounded in anything external to them but "in the action described in the counterfactual proposition itself" (110).

This third chapter is perhaps the most clearly organized chapter of the book, although again, some important concepts are left unexplained – we do not get a definition of Pelagianism until late in the discussion (and never of semi-Pelagianism); the reader is expected to figure out what 'creaturely counterfactuals' are; and terminology taken from other authors ('transworld depravity' or 'grounding' itself) is used without any reflection on them – and the referenced literature on almost all of the issues is rather old. But the perhaps most lacking part of this chapter is Wiebe's surprisingly brief treatment of the grounding objection. The briefness is surprising since the previous objections were built up in such a way that they could only be resolved by resolving the grounding objection. Wiebe presents his solution as based on Thomas Flint's solution to the same, and cites Plantinga's treatment of grounding at length (also based on Flint, not on Plantinga himself). According to this treatment, "the nature of a proposition's grounds depends upon and is indexed according to that proposition's modality" (109), and so – as William Craig has argued – Tarski's T-schema applies to counter-factuals just as it does to any other kind of propositions. Whether or not the solution works is not my aim to decide here, but the treatment, as compared to other parts of the book, turns unexpectedly very technical, and it is not even clear that various parts of the proposed solution fit together well.

One last thing I would like to comment on is the example Wiebe gives (based on Craig who traces it back to Galileo) to illustrate how we tend to regard counterfactuals as true even without any grounds. The example is about a stick set in motion in the aether. Although, according to Galileo, the aether does not exist, nevertheless we can still make true and not arbitrary claims about the motion of the stick. Now it is worth pointing out that Galileo is not original in this thought experiment, but similar ones were standardly used in later medieval discussions of Aristotle's *Physics*.[7] In these discussions (and also in Galileo), however, their upshot was precisely to figure out what *is* grounding the specific counterfactual in question: the thought experiments were set up in a way that some basic notion of movement or physical extension was taken for granted, and the rest of the thought experiment followed from that together with the initial setup of the experiment. Thus, the thought experiment was meant to demonstrate some features of, for instance, motion of bodies that were universal in such a way that they would even hold in impossible scenarios such as motion in the aether or in the void.[8] Although this is not a crucial part of Wiebe's argument, the example supplied thus fails to provide support for his claim that creaturely counterfactuals do not need to be grounded.

The last, fourth chapter, "Freedom, Foreknowledge, and the Problem of Evil" ties together several of the themes running through the book, focusing mostly on libertarianism. It starts by giving several arguments for libertarianism, citing some

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[7] For a general discussion of these, see, e.g., Peter King, "Medieval Thought-Experiments: The Metamethodology of Medieval Science," In *Thought-Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, ed. G Massey and T Horowitz (Lanham, MD: Rownman & Littlefield, 1991), 43–64.

[8] The perhaps most famous of these later medieval thought experiments is John Buridan's treatise on the void, where Buridan – after showing that the existence of vacuum would entail some logical contradictions – spends multiple questions on discussing how bodies would move in this impossible vacuum, demonstrating his later influential theory of impetus. (See his *Physics* commentary, book IV, qq. 7–11.)

Scriptural passages as well as Church Fathers, all pointing to the fact that we experience freedom in our own acts. The argument is strengthened by a quite detailed description of an argument provided by Austin Farrer against epiphenomenalism, according to which epiphenomenalism cannot account for how meaning governs discourse (the argument seems to be a 20 years older variety of the Chinese room). After this, the author turns to defending a modified version of the principle of alternative possibilities, according to which free will presupposes that there are at least *some* actions such that the agent could do otherwise. The final point of the book has to do with the problem of evil: as Wiebe argues, even if we grant that Aquinas would accept the same notion of libertarian freedom, Molina can give a much more satisfactory answer to the problem of evil, since he can say that not every possible world is such that God could create it (i.e., not every possible world is a feasible world) while for the Thomist it is much more difficult to see "why some people are not granted the justificatory grace necessary for good and meritorious action" (134).

The perhaps most interesting part of this closing chapter is Wiebe's argument against epiphenomenalism, although it is rather surprising in light of the recent literature that he based this argument on a sixty year old lecture. It seems that the argument could have been made stronger by paying more attention to some recent developments of the targeted theory. More importantly though, I remained unconvinced by the author's overall argument in the chapter, and found it problematic on multiple counts. First, on the methodological side, the author again mixes together various concerns of various thinkers, and does not quite show that the resulting mixture is legitimate – whether, for instance, Molina was in any part motivated by any concern similar to epiphenomenalism, whether it is meaningful to apply Stump's notion of quiescence (cited from a paper about Augustine's notion of the will) to Molina, or whether it is meaningful to treat Aquinas's notion of divine knowledge in terms of Molina's categories (i.e., as natural or free knowledge). The author also treats epiphenomenalism as the only alternative to a libertarian notion of free will. Since libertarianism plays a crucial part in the argument, it would have been helpful to describe a few other versions of compatibilism, especially since the passages cited from the Church fathers and Scripture would very well support almost any source model of free will. My gravest concern about the conclusion of the book, however, has to do with the final argument, according to which Aquinas's version of divine knowledge cannot account well for the problem of evil in terms of free will because it cannot make the distinction between possible and feasible worlds. Disregarding the issue whether such a distinction is indeed plausible or even meaningful (most medieval theologians would already object at this point), the author takes it for granted without even noting it explicitly that the best answer for the problem of evil is the free will defense. Now whatever we may think of the success of said defense on the one hand, and whatever we may think of Aquinas's answer to the problem of evil on the other hand, one thing is quite clear: Aquinas is not concerned at all with giving a free will defense to the problem of evil. Some interpreters would go as far as saying that the problem of evil does not even arise for Aquinas.[9] However this may be, the fact that Aquinas's theory of divine knowledge does not support a free will defense

[9] See, e.g., Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

can hardly be counted against his theory if we are aware of the fact that he would not accept the free will defense to start with. (One might, of course, think that the free will defense *is* the best available defense we have, but in that case one should already expect disagreements with Aquinas on every connected issue.)

All in all, although I have been focusing on some points of criticism in this presentation, Wiebe's book is certainly not without merits. It gives an interesting overview of Molina's theory of divine foreknowledge, and also of the problems traditionally associated with such a theory. It introduces the reader both to the historical context around post-Reformation Europe, and to some contemporary discussions on problems related to divine foreknowledge, providence, and free will. Although the analytic philosopher might get somewhat frustrated on the way because of the lack of precision in the treatment of several concepts, and the historian of philosophy or theology might wish for some more refined treatment of the primary material, the book would serve as a useful gateway for a theologically trained reader to explore some problems in the history of philosophy or analytic philosophy of religion in more detail. Thus, even though I do not think that the author's earlier noted aim of bridging the gap between the philosophical and theological discussions is successful, he at least gives a blueprint of such a bridge as well as helps the reader realize how badly indeed such a bridge is needed.