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The Art of God

Robert R. Cook

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The notion of God as artificer can be traced right back to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures where Jeremiah likens Israel to potters' clay malleable in the hands of the Lord (Jer. 18:6). The simile has proved serviceable to various theologians down through the centuries. Aquinas, for example, wrote of God as 'the cause of all things through his mind and will, like an artist of works of art'.¹ However, discussion in this article will be restricted to the exploration of the comparison between God and the literary artist, particularly the novelist. Although, of course, this is not strictly a biblical metaphor since the novel genre only dates back to the eighteenth century, R. Nozick whimsically observes that it is not too fanciful an extrapolation from the idea found in the first chapter of the book of Genesis where God utters the universe into being, for 'the only thing mere speaking can create, we know, is a story, a play, an epic poem, a fiction. Where we live is created by and in words: a universe'.²

Now, the main problem with the artist analogy is that it seems to entail creaturely determinism: the artifact is purely passive as, apparently, are fictional characters. This is probably why it has appealed most to scholars of a Reformed disposition who stress divine sovereignty in creation and providence. Donald MacKay is one recent exponent who is satisfied with the picture of man as literary character, because a fictional person is neither a puppet with no will at all, nor a play-actor in a drama with a pretended will other than his own, but he is rather someone who is a genuine agent with desires and a will of his own. MacKay is well aware that the main objection to the soft-determinism inherent in this view is the charge that, nevertheless, responsibility for human actions must lie with the divine author, and he responds by drawing the distinction between God forcing agents to do something by acting upon them within space-time and God causing them to be as they are, and he concludes that since the latter is the case, 'he obviously in no sense makes them act wickedly, though he does hold in being the world-history in which they do so, and in that sense, "brings it about" that they do'.³

But although a subtle exponent of the Calvinistic view, MacKay's account fails to avoid its fundamental weakness for surely there is an equivocation in the word 'makes' here, since although God may not make in the sense of force against their will, he certainly makes in the sense of causes, and this must be enough to place responsibility squarely on God. MacKay is adamant that God is not accountable however since,

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like the author of a book, he inhabits a totally distinct world to his characters; it would be something like a category-mistake to blame him for what we do. But what MacKay overlooks is the fact that these two worlds do overlap, for not only is incarnation at the heart of Christian doctrine but so also is the teaching that one day each person must appear before God and give account of his or her life. It still remains unclear what reply God could make to the defence

¹ *Summa Theologiae* 1a.45.6 (Blackfriars edn.; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode).

² R. Nozick, 'Fiction', D. R. Hofstadter and D. C. Dennett (eds.), *The Mind's I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 462.

³ D. M. MacKay, *Science, Chance and Providence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 63.

that I was merely an instrument wielded by God who should therefore be in the dock himself. John Hick is right when he asserts: 'If all our thoughts and actions are divinely predestined, however free and morally responsible we may seem to be to ourselves, we cannot be free and morally responsible in the sight of God, but must instead be his helpless puppets.'⁴ Characters in a book can praise and blame one another since they do not realise they are only characters and ciphers of their creator, but their author cannot hold them responsible because he does so realise. It could be argued that he would be justified in rewarding the virtuous character by some benefaction within the plot since such a moral tale makes for noble literature which exalts its author, and similarly God is glorified by the events he orchestrates in his universe. However, the prime difference is that fictional characters not only lack free will but they have no sensations either, for they are not actual people. If they were so, the author would not be justified in either rewarding or punishing them.

Does this mean then that the author/novel analogy must be discarded because of its obvious deterministic implications? I think not, and in the remainder of this article I propose both to rework it in a non-Calvinist direction so as to preserve libertarian freedom for the creature, and also try to exploit it to shed light on a central problem of another theological school of thought, namely Molinism.

Like their sixteenth century mentor, modern Molinists reject the view that God just possesses limited foreknowledge, only knowing what could happen (that is, the range of possibilities and probabilities) [cf. Process theism], and they repudiate the claim that God only enjoys simple foreknowledge whereby he is merely cognizant of what will happen. Instead they assert that he is also fully aware of what specifically would happen in hypothetical circumstances involving genuinely free beings whose choices cannot therefore be extrapolated from a perfect knowledge of all present states of affairs. This concept of prescience is known historically as middle knowledge and it is offered by its adherents as the metaphysical key which unlocks a multitude of theological jammed doors, from the freedom/predestination dilemma to the problem of divine guidance.⁵

The revival of Molinism is closely related to the rapid development in the past twenty years of modal logic which has proved an extremely useful tool in analysing a multiplicity of problem areas, from counterfac-

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tual conditions to probability theory. This branch of logic is concerned with modal statements in which something is said to be necessarily or possibly the case. The question is thus raised as to the ontological status of these possibilities. Are they real? Are things which are possible, possible things? If so, do they exist in possible worlds? And are these worlds real? Answers have varied. Some have contended that the logic of possible worlds is merely an heuristic device, these worlds lacking ontological reality. As B. Aune writes, 'We can imagine something without thereby having to acknowledge that there is (existentially speaking) something we imagine'.⁶ Others have maintained what J. R. Lucas calls 'ontologically juicy'⁷

⁴ J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), 39.

⁵ See my review article, 'God, Middle Knowledge and Alternative Worlds', *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:4 (1990), 293-310.

⁶ B. Aune, *Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 73.

⁷ J. R. Lucas, *The Future* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 139.

theories, such as that of D. Lewis whereby possible worlds have an ontological status on a par with our own world, we just do not happen to live in them.

Behind the debate lurks the ancient dispute between nominalists and realists as to whether abstract objects like universals and possible worlds are merely linguistic phenomena or objectively real; are they created or discovered? Needless to say, Molinists tend to be of a Platonic cast. Leibniz, for instance, in his argument in favour of estimating this universe as the best of all possible worlds, describes created things as fulgurations (literally 'flashes of light') suggesting that they are more like emanations than constructions. In recent years, Alvin Plantinga has spoken of possible beings as 'essences', each of which consists of those properties that a specified individual would possess in every possible world that he could inhabit and which are unique and essential to that individual. These essences do exist but only as possibilities unless God decides to actualise them. *Pace* Aquinas, God's knowledge of future creaturely choices is not the knowledge of his own will, for essences are autonomous. As Jonathan Kvanvig explains, 'Rather, it is the fact that an essence includes a maximal subjunctive of freedom that explains how God knows what an instantiation of that essence will do'.⁸

Opponents of Molinism scratch their heads, and still wonder what the ontological status of these possible people could be, and ask how these potential creatures could make any decisions which an omniscient being could know of and accordingly decide whether to include them in his actualised world. To argue that character traits inherent in the essence inevitably result in the choices would be a return to determinism, and an exasperated William Hasker concludes, 'Lacking the agent's actual making of the choice... there is nothing that disambiguates the situation and makes it true that some one of the options is the one that would be selected'.⁹

Yet modern disciples of Molina—who himself wrote of God's supercomprehension of possible agents—continue to suggest that God has perfect understanding of individual essences so that he can discern how they would freely act were they to be instantiated in actual persons. Analogies for this counter-intuitive conviction would prove helpful but

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very few have been offered. One has been suggested by C. G. Normore who writes:

Imagine that God's mind contains a perfect model of each possible thing—a complete divine idea of a particular, or, if you like, an individual concept. Imagine that God simulates possible histories by thinking about how the being which is A would behave under circumstance C—i.e. he simulates C and 'sees' how A behaves. Now if there is a way in which A would behave in C, a perfect model should reflect it, so if conditional excluded middle is valid such a model is possible and God knows the history of the world by knowing that model, i.e. by knowing his own intellect and his creative intentions.¹⁰

However, the problem with this analogy which conjures up the picture of a celestial super-computer, is that computer programmes run on specific data, but it is difficult to see how

⁸ J. L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 126.

⁹ W. Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 20.

¹⁰ C. G. Nor-more, 'Divine Omniscience, Omnipotence and Future Contingents: An Overview', T. Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 15f.

essences with their free will capacity could be so reduced as to be able to be entered into the specifications of a programme. Certainly a randomiser could be introduced in an attempt to accommodate this unpredictable element into the programme, but it is plain that indeterminacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for free will. Nevertheless, the idea of simulation is suggestive and could perhaps be strengthened, for example, with reference to the science of Chaos where a specific formula might be programmed into a computer whereby the ensuing process is unpredictable to all.¹¹

Perhaps, in contrast, the illuminating middle knowledge analogy sought for is none other than a modified version of the literary author metaphor which would seem to afford a superior comparison from the realm of imaginative creativity rather than the rational world of programmes operating according to rigid logical rules. When describing God who is personal, the most fruitful and the safest analogies are always those pertaining to consciousness rather than, for instance, artificial intelligence. This is one major reason why Augustine's comparison of the Trinity with facets of the human psyche is to be preferred to, say, Tertullian's picture of the tree as root, bowl and fruit. The suggestion presented here is that the mystery of the human author's perceived mental relationship with his fictional characters could be a mirror of God's awareness of human essences.

B. Aune surely writes as a non-practitioner when he attempts to analyse what we really mean when we claim that 'there is' a specific character in a work of fiction by stating,

[W]e can only mean that such a character is described or referred to in the novel. A novel, being a book, actually contains words and

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descriptions, not characters and scenes.... It doesn't follow that just because we can imagine something, there is in the existential sense something that we imagine.¹²

When writing of their craft, great authors are prone to disagree. W. B. Yeats, for example, was repeatedly aware of characters appearing in his mind from what he first came to believe as the Great Memory (a sort of Collective Unconscious), 'but this was not enough, for these images showed intention and choice'.¹³ Others concur that their fictional characters are as much encountered as conceived. Take, for example, W. Somerset Maugham,

A character in a writer's head, unwritten, remains a possession; his thoughts recur to it constantly, and while his imagination gradually enriches it he enjoys the singular pleasure of feeling that there, in his mind, someone is living a varied and tremulous life, obedient to his fancy and yet in a queer wilful way independent of him.¹⁴

As Maugham indicates, characters display a remarkable autonomy so that the story which is 'actualised' on the pages of the novel is necessarily a compromise between the circumstances that the author constructs and the specific characters which he chooses to employ on the one hand, and the actions which the characters choose to perform on the other.

¹¹ It is, of course, a moot point as to whether chaotic events are in principle or just in practice unpredictable. John Polkinghorne, for one, suspects the former (see his *Science and Providence* [London: SPCK, 1989], 29).

¹² Aune, *Metaphysics*, 71.

¹³ W. B. Yeats, 'Anima Mundi', *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 345. It is a wonder that the New Age Movement has not identified Yeats as one of the patriarchs of channeling!

¹⁴ W. S. Maugham, *Cakes and Ale* (London: Heinemann, 1930), v-vi.

In her seminal book, *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers ponders at length on this mystery, noting that the autobiographical element of a novel is usually in inverse proportion to the creativity of the writer; the more genuinely creative he is, the less his characters are merely a projection of his own tastes and character traits. Characters take on their own distinctive personalities so that, for instance, it would be absurd to pen a novel where Sir Peter Wimsey converts to Christianity given his worldly character. Lesser novelists do force their literary creations to act in a certain way in order to conform to a popular plot format, but 'it profits a book nothing to gain the whole circulating library, and lose its own soul'.¹⁵ Similarly God 'does not desire that his creature's identity should be merged in his own, nor that his miraculous power should be invoked to wrest the creature from its proper nature'.¹⁶ Finally, Sayers notes the inner compulsion to bring a literary world to birth: 'that a work of creation struggles and insistently demands to be brought into being is a fact that no genuine artist would think of denying.'¹⁷

The profound mystery of human creativity is borne out by more recent novelists. For example, eschewing the Victorian image of the omniscient, sovereign author, J. Fowles writes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk

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straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy.

Oh but you say, come on—what I really mean is that the idea crossed my mind as I wrote that it might be more clever to have him stop and drink milk... and meet Sarah again. That is certainly one explanation of what happened; but I can only report—and I am the most reliable witness—that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself.¹⁸

His notes on writing that novel make it clear that Fowles is not merely posing in the above passage. He writes:

I was struck this morning to find a good answer from Sarah at the climax of a scene. Characters sometimes reject all possibilities one offers. They say in effect: *I would never say or do a thing like that*. But they don't say what they would say; and one has to proceed negatively, by a very tedious coaxing kind of trial and error. After an hour over this one wretched sentence, I realized that she had in fact been telling me what to do; silence from her was better than any line she might have said.¹⁹

A second example comes from A. Burgess who insists that the author has to come to terms with the fact that his characters have a will of their own:

¹⁵ D. L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), 107.

¹⁶ Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 106.

¹⁷ Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 118.

¹⁸ J. Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 98.

¹⁹ J. Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', M. Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 147.

This free will causes trouble for the novelist who sees himself as a kind of small God of the Calvinist, able to predict what is going to happen on the final page. No novelist who has created a credible personage can ever be quite sure what that personage will do. Create your characters, give them a time and place to exist in, and leave the plot to them.... At best there will be a compromise between the narrative line you have dreamed up and the course of action preferred by the characters.²⁰

The parallels with middle knowledge are intriguing. On the one hand, the 'essences' which the novelists describe are mind-dependent (Burgess relates how one character called Enderby first came into his mind and although this character was tenacious for actualisation in a novel, 'He will... eventually die, but only because his creator will die'²¹); but on the other hand, they possess a quasi-autonomy (Fowles shares how characters like Sarah nudge into his consciousness: 'I ignore them, since that is the best way of finding whether they really are the door into a new world'²²). Similarly, according to Luis de Molina and his disciples, the items of middle knowledge are perceived innately. They are akin to Augustine's *rationes aeternae*, subsisting eternally in God's mind. Yet the actual content of divine middle knowledge is not up to God; it is 'discovered' by him. Moreover, as with foreknowledge, God does not acquire middle knowledge inferentially through deduction from known

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character traits; it is not gained through prediction from present causes which would deprive the known agent of significant freedom. Middle knowledge is rather intuitively grasped through a profound understanding of the individual soul including its intrinsic freedom. It is the fruit of understanding and wisdom rather than scientific knowledge and naked intelligence. That is, it is the product of infinite divine love rather than the unlimited divine intellect. Similarly, novelists like Fowles and Burgess know how their characters would react to this or that specific circumstance by mentally trying them out by placing them there in their imaginations, rather than mechanically working out their responses through rational analysis of their psychological constitution. And, of course, the author might always decide not to write a specific scene into the novel and thus it remains only part of a possible world and his cognition of it remains 'middle knowledge' rather than what Molina would call 'free knowledge', which is knowledge of the world that the Creator has chosen to bring into being.

In response to the possible criticism that this analogy of the production of novels falls far short of the genuine creation of objective free persons, the contrast between human finitude and God's omnipotence should be stressed. But a strange phenomenon noted in the literature of parapsychology could also be introduced to strengthen the analogy. It is claimed that those with strong imaginations may not only vividly picture something themselves, but may also, on occasion, cause someone else to see it. To cite W. B. Yeats again, an incident is recounted where he once passed by a servant as he was fancifully day-dreaming that his arm was in a sling, only to encounter an agitated friend later in the day who appeared worried because the maid had reported that Yeats had hurt his arm; he concludes, 'I had cast my imagination so strongly upon the servant that she had seen it, and with what had appeared to be more than the mind's eye'.²³ Further, it is claimed that under certain conditions, a person may not only see his fictional character (Burgess first glimpsed Enderby sitting on his toilet writing poetry!) but

²⁰ A. Burgess, *Ninety Nine Novels* (New York: Summit, 1984), 15f.

²¹ A. Burgess, *Enderby's Dark Lady* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 8.

²² Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', 136.

²³ W. B. Yeats, 'Magic', *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 36f.

bring it about that others glimpse it also. This is exactly what A. David-Neel reports having achieved through the practice of rituals taught to her by Tibetan Buddhists. She claims to have chosen to conjure up the *tulpa* of a fat monk and on one occasion as she reports, 'a herdsman who brought me a present of butter saw the *tulpa* in my tent and took it for a live lama'.²⁴ But eventually the creation became troublesome when it seemed to break free of her control. She decided to dissolve it: 'I succeeded, but only after six months of hard struggle. My mind-creature was tenacious of life.'²⁵ However we assess these strange tales, it seems clear that our facility as demi-creators and realisers of fictional worlds may signify one of the most important aspects of the *imago dei* in man and furnish one of the most fecund analogies for the mode of divine cognition of possible worlds.

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²⁴ A. David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Penguin, 1973 [first published in French, 1929]), 315.

²⁵ David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, 315.