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GOD, CAUSALITY, AND PETITIONARY PRAYER

Caleb Murray Cohoe

Many maintain that petitionary prayer is pointless. I argue that the theist can defend petitionary prayer by giving a general account of how divine and creaturely causation can be compatible and complementary, based on the claim that the goodness of something depends on its cause. I use Thomas Aquinas's metaphysical framework to give an account that explains why a world with creaturely causation better reflects God's goodness than a world in which God brought all things about immediately. In such a world, prayer could allow us to cause good things in a distinctive way: by asking God for them.

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

—*Luke 11:9, ESV*

These words of Jesus, boldly enjoining his disciples to pray, illustrate the importance of petitionary prayer to Christian belief and practice, an importance that is evident both in Christian Scripture and throughout the Christian tradition. Christians believe that followers of God should petition him for their needs, both physical and spiritual, and that God will respond to these prayers.¹ Many have challenged this view of petitionary prayer. Why would God make the reception of certain goods dependent on prayer, particularly since Christians hold that God “knows what you need before you ask him”?² Does prayer really bring about anything? Should it?

Many hold that petitionary prayer cannot and should not make a difference to what happens. Even many of those who believe that a divine

¹Some theologians and philosophers (both from within and from outside the Christian tradition) have offered alternative accounts of petitionary prayer, arguing that such prayer is valuable not because God responds in any active way to the requests contained in it, but because the practice of petitionary prayer serves other important purposes, such as changing the character and desires of the one praying or making people more aware of the needs of others and more ready to act on these needs (cf. D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* [New York, NY: Seabury 1981], chap. 6). In this paper I will not consider these alternative accounts, since my object is to argue that petitionary prayer could, in fact, be valuable precisely insofar as it involves God's responding to the requests made in such prayers (though I am certainly not denying that petitionary prayer could be valuable in other ways).

²Matthew 6:8.



being exists think that asking such a being to do something is pointless. Asking for special divine favor, in their view, is a sign of spiritual immaturity and obsession with one's self. In spite of these commonly voiced objections, prayer is one of the most common and widespread spiritual practices. According to the Baylor Religion Survey, for example, 84 percent of all Americans pray on at least some occasions and 27 percent pray multiple times a day.³

In this paper, I will consider one of the main objections leveled against petitionary prayer, that it is pointless, and argue that this objection can be defeated. There are good reasons for thinking that petitionary prayer can be valuable and effective. I begin by presenting an argument (originally formulated by Eleonore Stump) against the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. I show how this argument can be generalized to call into question the effectiveness of any sort of creaturely causation. I then draw on the metaphysical framework of Thomas Aquinas in order to give an account of goodness, creaturely causation, and God's power that shows the distinctive value of creaturely causation. Aquinas gives us a reasonable metaphysical position from which we can offer an account of why God allows created things to be causally active and why God brings things about in response to prayer. An order of created things which includes creaturely causation and petitionary prayer is better than one in which God brings all things about immediately. Creaturely causation shows God's power, fulfills created things, and makes the world better reflect God's goodness. Prayer furthers our relationship with God and allows us to cause good things in a distinctive way: by asking God for them.

Throughout this paper, I employ a traditional Christian conception of God. On this conception God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. God is the creator of everything in the universe and governs and orders the entire universe for the good, helping human beings to come to know and love him. Although the conception of God I employ is distinctively Christian, the importance of the considerations I put forward extends beyond the Christian tradition. The arguments I present are relevant for addressing similar questions about petitionary prayer that arise in other religious traditions with conceptions of a provident God. The issues examined here are also important for the broader questions of whether an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being exists and whether such a being could show concern for the desires of human beings.

³Christopher David Bader, Kevin D. Dougherty, Paul Froese, Byron Johnson, Frederick Carson Mencken, Jerry Z. Park, Rodney Stark, *American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US* (Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, 2006), Table 8. The survey does not distinguish between petitionary prayer and other types of prayer, but given the centrality of petitionary prayer in most of the predominant religious traditions in America, it is reasonable to think that much of the prayer reported is of the petitionary kind. Similar survey data is not available for all countries, but it is reasonable to assume that many other nations also have significant rates of prayer.

I. The Problem

Eleonore Stump, in an influential paper entitled "Petitionary Prayer," formulates an important argument against the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. She begins by assuming that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. From this assumption, she first argues that, "[God] . . . always makes the world better than it would otherwise be." She then introduces a premise about the object of petitionary prayer: "[w]hat is requested in [many and the most important] petitionary prayers is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world either worse or better than it would otherwise be (that is, than it would have been had that state of affairs not been realized)." This allows her to make a two-pronged argument against the efficacy of petitionary prayer: if what is requested would make the world worse than it would otherwise be, God will not fulfill the request, while if what is requested would make the world better than it would otherwise be, God "will bring about that state of affairs even if no prayer for its realization has been made." In either case petitionary prayer effects no significant change. Thus, petitionary prayer is pointless. We have no reason to pray.⁴

Several responses have been given to this argument, by Stump herself and by others.⁵ These responses typically take petitionary prayer to pose a unique problem for the committed theist. They then attempt to give a plausible account for why, in some cases, God could justifiably give certain goods only in response to a request. In contrast, I think that the problem of petitionary prayer is not unique, but is instead a particular instance of more general issues that the Christian or theist faces in giving an account of how divine and creaturely causation can be compatible and complementary. I will thus approach Stump's objection to petitionary prayer by generalizing it to all creaturely causation and discussing the metaphysical assumptions the objection involves. I aim to show that the issues that arise when we consider whether God can grant certain goods in response to requests are of the same kind as those raised when we consider any sort of events or actions that would require a balance between divine and creaturely causation or agency. The response I ultimately offer to Stump's objection is compatible with much of what has been said in

⁴Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), 83–85.

⁵Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 86–91; Joshua Hoffman, "On Petitionary Prayer," *Faith and Philosophy* 2:1 (1985), 21–29; Michael Murray and Kurt Meyers, "Ask and It Will be Given to You," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), 311–330; Jerome Gellman, "In Defense of Petitionary Prayer," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 21 (1997), 83–97; Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1998), chap. 10; Lawrence Masek, "Petitionary Prayer to an Omnipotent and Omnibenevolent God," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (Suppl.) (2000), 273–283; Michael Murray, "God Responds to Prayer," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Ray van Arragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 242–254; Michael Murray, "Reply to Basinger," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, 264–265; Nicholas D. Smith, and Andrew C. Yip, "Partnership with God: A Partial Solution to the Problem of Petitionary Prayer," *Religious Studies* 46:3 (2010), 395–410.

the responses of others, but I want to show that generalizing the problem will help us to better understand this objection and see how an effective response can be made.

Extending the pointlessness argument to other cases involving causation allows us to see that Stump's type of objection does not apply uniquely to petitionary prayer. We can easily formulate a similar argument to support the claim that any sort of action or causation, by humans or by any other created thing, is ineffectual. If the created thing's action would make the world better than it would otherwise be, God will bring about the same good even if the creature does not cause it. If the created thing's action makes the world worse than it would otherwise be, God will either act so as to prevent the creature from causing that thing or will act to negate its bad effects. If it is good for your body to be nourished, then God will nourish you even if you do not eat. If it is good for you to be in a certain place, then God will place you there, even if you do not go there yourself. Thus, created things effect no significant change in things and none of their causal activities make the world better than it would otherwise be. If this is right, we can have no reason to do anything, assuming that God exists in the way I have outlined.

This extended argument challenges us to show the value not just of prayer but of any sort of creaturely causation. It can also be posed as a special version of the argument from evil against God's existence: if God existed, God would have to intervene in this way, but it is evident that God does not intervene in this way, so God must not exist. The much stronger and seemingly surprising conclusion of the extended argument serves to draw attention to the assumptions involved. Two crucial components of the argument should be clarified. The first concerns God's power. In its original formulation by Stump, the argument defines God's omnipotence as the ability to "do anything which it is not logically impossible for him to do," but it does not make all the relevant implications of this definition explicit.⁶ Does God eternally know what created things cause or does God temporally react to the actions of created things? Can God bring things about through creaturely causes? Different answers to these questions result in different views about the extent to which God can bring about a similar outcome whether or not someone prays or some creature acts. The second crucial component requiring clarification is the understanding of good and bad involved in the premises of the argument, particularly as applied to the world. What does it mean for the world as a whole to be good or for it to become better or worse? If God is good, does that mean that he must always bring about the best?

Consideration of these assumptions shows that there are a number of ways in which one could respond to the argument. In my response, I shall use Thomas Aquinas's accounts of goodness, creaturely causation, and God's power to show how creaturely causation and petitionary prayer

⁶Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 83.

contribute to the goodness of the world and are effectual, given Christian beliefs. Aquinas offers one of the best worked out and most influential metaphysical positions concerning the nature of God, creatures, and goodness. If his account is reasonable, then showing that, on his account, divine and creaturely causation are compatible will provide good evidence that creaturely causation is not incompatible with or superfluous to divine causation. Even those who disagree with key aspects of Aquinas's account may find my presentation helpful for identifying and exploring the key metaphysical claims about goodness and God that are needed to evaluate the argument I am addressing.

II. Aquinas's Framework

In order to evaluate Aquinas's account of the goodness of creaturely causation, we first need to understand his account of God's creation of the world and the goodness of the world. I shall present Aquinas's claims on these matters in outline, assuming that they form a reasonable position that we can use as the crucial background to his account of creaturely causation. On Aquinas's understanding, God creates the world through a free act of his will. God did not have to create something, nor did he, in creating, have to create the world he did.⁷ Aquinas argues that the goodness of any created thing or combination of created things is limited, because their being is limited, while God's goodness is unlimited because his being is unlimited.⁸ Given this, there is no world that can adequately express God's unlimited goodness and therefore no best world for him to create. Since no created order of things is adequate to the divine goodness, the divine wisdom is not forced to create a certain order of things.⁹ As no finite number is the closest to the infinite, so no world is best or closest to the divine goodness. There is no best world that God must create.

Given that God does create a world, however, there are certain conditions such a world must meet, given God's goodness and justice. For Aquinas a world is unified and can be called good in virtue of the ordering toward God common to all the things in it.¹⁰ Anything which God creates must be ordered towards God as end: it must manifest God's goodness by reflecting some aspect of who God is. Given God's justice, he gives to all created things the powers and conditions their natures require so that they may be ordered towards him and reflect his goodness.¹¹ Human beings, for example, need hands to use as tools in order to provide themselves

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST), *Prima Pars* (I), question 19 (q.19) article 2 (a.2), a.3; q.25 a.5.

⁸ST I q.7, a.1–2; q.25 a.5, corpus; q.47, a.1, corpus, a.2, corpus. Since God's essence (*essentia*) is the same as his being or existence (*esse*), his essence does not limit his being. The essences of all created things, by contrast, differ from their existence or being and limit the sort of being or existence they can receive.

⁹ST I q.25 a.5, corpus; q.47, a.1, corpus, a.2, corpus.

¹⁰ST I q.25, a.6, ad. 3., q. 47, a.1–3.

¹¹ST I q.21, a.1, corpus, ad. 3.

with clothing, food, shelter and other goods essential to their survival and flourishing.¹² If God decides to create human beings, God's justice requires that he ensure that human beings do not systematically lack such a crucial part of their bodies.¹³

On Aquinas's account, things reflect God's goodness both in their individual natures and as part of the larger world order, in their common and interconnected ordering to God.¹⁴ Since our world is created and ordered out of God's infinite wisdom and goodness, there is no better way of making this world.¹⁵ God has given the things he has chosen to create the most appropriate order, one that cannot be improved upon: I shall call this claim the Best-Ordering Principle.¹⁶ Making one of these things better would make the world as a whole worse by harming its order, just as, in an excellent piece of music, introducing a consonant note in place of a dissonant one would make the note sound better, but the piece worse. Aquinas thinks that God could make a better world than ours, but that our particular world could not be made in a better way. Although our world is not the best of all possible worlds, it is as good as any world that contains only the created things present in it could be.

¹²ST I q.21,a.1, ad. 3.

¹³For Thomas, the human body is an essential part of what a human being is. If God created creatures with powers similar to a human being but with some other organs in place of hands, this would not, for Thomas, be a case of creating human beings without hands, but a case of creating a different natural kind. God may be able to create a rational creature without hands who possesses powers similar to those of a human being, but God cannot create a world in which human beings are systematically missing hands. Some human beings may lack hands, but these human beings can be helped by those who do, whereas the systematic lack of hands would prevent human beings from being able to gather food, effectively build houses, etc.

There are several issues here relating to the problem of evil. Some may object that justice would require God to give every *individual* creature *everything* it needs to flourish. Others might object by noting the huge number of species that have gone extinct, suggesting that many living things have lacked the abilities (or environment) necessary for their survival and flourishing and thus telling against Aquinas's account. These objections raise important issues about the relationship between divine providence, evolution, and change and decay, issues that go beyond the scope of this essay. I will merely note that the ability of various kinds of living things to adapt and flourish throughout a huge range of conditions on earth is truly impressive and seems to provide at least some evidence for Aquinas's account (though, of course, it is possible that this evidence accords as well or better with non-theistic evolutionary accounts).

¹⁴ST I q.21, a.1, corpus, ad. 3.

¹⁵ST I q.25, a.6, ad. 1.

¹⁶ST I q.25, a.6, ad. 3. It is unclear precisely which created things Aquinas is taking as given when claiming that our universe is best ordered or what sort of change in created things would be sufficient to make a world that is not merely differently ordered from ours but actually a *different world* (possibly the two key factors would be the types of created things contained in the world [e.g., does the world included material elements, human beings, angels etc.] and the way in which the created things in that world are ordered to God [e.g., are they ordered towards God only through manifesting some divine likeness or also through receiving knowledge of God and loving Him]). For my purposes, however, it is the principle itself that is important, not its precise application. What if there is more than one best ordering of those things that God creates? We can modify the principle slightly: God must order whatever he makes in such a way that it could not be ordered better than it is.

Why, then, is it good for our world to involve causation on the part of creatures? Aquinas argues that creaturely causation both shows God's power and perfection, and makes creatures better and better ordered. Creaturely causation shows God's power and goodness in a way that a world with the same creatures but without creaturely causation would not. Aquinas argues that God would be less powerful if he could cause things but could not give these things their own causal powers.¹⁷ An agent that not only produces an effect, but gives the object of the effect a similar causal power, is more powerful than an agent who can only produce the effect. For instance, a teacher who both teaches his students and enables them to teach others is a better and more powerful teacher than one who can only impart knowledge directly. God therefore shows his goodness and power more fully by bringing things about through secondary causes.¹⁸

Creaturely causation also makes created things and the order between them better. If God failed to allow created things to exercise their causal powers, he would fail to make the order of created things he chose to make as good as it could be. The things that God has created all have a certain nature. For a thing to have a nature or be of some sort, it must have some characteristics. These involve the way it acts on other things and the way it is able to be acted upon by other things. If it never acts on things or is acted upon by them, then it never exemplifies its relevant characteristics and never fully is what it is, and so fails to achieve its own distinctive good.¹⁹ In exercising their causal powers, created things better reflect the aspect of God's goodness that their natures are meant to express. Thus a world in which human beings accomplish things through their actions is better than a world in which human beings are not allowed to use their causal powers.²⁰

Creaturely causation also allows created things to be better by allowing them to contribute to the good of other created things. Aquinas argues that it is better for a thing to be good in itself and the cause of goodness in others than for it to only be good in itself. For example, someone who is herself good and also helps her friends to be good is better than someone who is good herself but does not contribute to her friends' goodness. This also makes the order of created things better. If God simply made both the good person and her friend good, they would be good, but she would not

¹⁷Perhaps someone could deny that created things can have causal powers, but we have seen no reason why traditional Christian belief in God would commit us to denying that this is a possibility, and Aquinas's metaphysics certainly gives him reason to think that created things can have causal powers.

¹⁸*ST I* q.103 a.6, q.105 a.5, corpus. As long as this principle is a reasonable one, it can form the basis of a reasonable account of how divine causation can be compatible with creaturely causation and petitionary prayer, even if not everyone accepts it. Similarly for the other principles I discuss.

¹⁹While direct causal interactions with God might allow us to use some of our causal powers, it is plausible to think that many of the causal powers of created things are directed towards other created things.

²⁰Cf. *ST I* q.103 a.6, q.105 a.5.

contribute to her friend's goodness and there would be no connection between their goodness. There are extra goods present when someone contributes to her friend's goodness. Given the Best-Ordering Principle, God must allow the things he has created to exercise their causal powers, since a world in which God denied these created things the exercise of their powers would not be as well ordered. God's goodness and power would not be displayed to the same degree, the created things themselves would not be as good, and the order between created things would be worse, as no created thing would contribute to the good of another created thing.²¹

III. The Value of Creaturely Causation

How, then, do these considerations apply to the case envisaged by our argument in which created things may bring about certain effects, but God will immediately cause anything good which they do not? I have argued that Aquinas lays out a reasonable metaphysical framework on which there is a distinctive good in creaturely causation, a good that is not present when God immediately brings something about. Given this, it is false to claim that for each case of creaturely causation, God can bring about an equivalent good. In some cases of creaturely causation, part of the goodness of the effect lies in the distinctive way it is brought about. If we qualify the argument by claiming that God will immediately bring about a similar state of affairs only when this contributes to the overall order and goodness of the world, we will no longer have an argument against the compatibility of divine and creaturely causation. The argument now acknowledges that goods brought about through creaturely causation are different from those brought about by God's immediate action and, thus, that creaturely causation is not ineffectual or pointless. There is, therefore, no structural incompatibility between God's activity and efficacious creaturely causation.

Nevertheless, the objector may still put this argument forward as a version of the problem of evil. If there really were an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being, this being would need to backup and correct the goodness in the order of things. Insofar as the causal activities of creatures promoted the good, creatures would cause the good; insofar as creatures failed to cause the good or caused evil, their causal activity would be supplemented or negated by God's immediate activity. Since we do not see God consistently performing immediate revisionary interventions, the order of things is not as it would be if there was a God, so there is no God.

Answering this objection requires further comparison of the value of things brought about through any given sort of creaturely causation with the value of things brought about through a different sort of creaturely causation or immediately by God. The objection assumes that the sorts of things that are good when brought about by some creature will be similarly good when brought about in some other way. There are two

²¹Cf. *ST I* q.103 a.6, q.105 a.5.

problems with this assumption. First of all, in many cases it would be better for the thing in question not to be brought about than for it to be brought about in some other way. For example, it is better for me not to eat lunch than to steal my lunch, even though it is better for me to eat a lunch I paid for than not to eat lunch. Secondly, certain effects are what they are because of the way they are brought about. When my son gives me a hug, the hug's character and value comes from the fact that it is my son who is performing the action of hugging me. A hug from someone else would neither have the same value nor be the same thing. In some cases, then, effects brought about through certain sorts of creaturely causation either will not be valuable when brought about in other ways or cannot be produced by a different kind of causation.

IV. The Value of Petitionary Prayer

The objector may still maintain that there are many goods which would be good whether produced by creaturely causation or direct divine action, but which God fails to provide. In addressing this reformulated objection, I will focus on petitionary prayer, the kind of creaturely causation we were initially concerned with, instead of attempting the much more daunting task of giving a complete and global account that assesses the value of all the different kinds of creaturely causation and how these values affect the problem of evil.²² So, should God bring about similar goods even in the absence of petitionary prayer for these goods? Again making use of Aquinas, I will argue that there is a particular value to God's bringing things about through prayer. Goods that are not brought about through petitionary prayer will not be goods in the same way and may not even be good. Further, many of the goods that Christians seek in petitionary prayer and hold to be most valuable cannot be brought about in some other way. God's bringing certain things about in response to petitionary prayer is therefore consistent with his goodness.

On Aquinas's account, prayer causes something not by necessitating that thing, but by being conducive to it. Asking God for something is like asking another human being for something: it is an instance of asking for something from an equal or superior, not of commanding an inferior. In the case of commanding an inferior, what is commanded will be carried out.²³ In the case of asking, it is only if the person being asked is receptive that what we ask for will come about. When they are receptive, they will do what we ask and the thing will come about on account of our request.²⁴ Aquinas argues that there are several ways in which God can bring things about in response to our prayer. First, God can bring the object of prayer

²²Considerations analogous to those that I bring forward in the case of petitionary prayer can be presented in defense of other kinds of creaturely causation.

²³It will be carried out assuming that this order is acknowledged and in the absence of some failure in execution or the opposed activity of some other cause.

²⁴*ST* IIa-IIae q.83 a.1, corpus.

about through the order of natural causes. For example, God can answer a prayer for rain through his ordering of natural causes. God's response to prayer can also involve ordering the activities of rational agents in addition to other natural causes, since their activities are, for Aquinas, included in God's providential ordering.²⁵ A prayer for a successful medical operation or a safe journey could be fulfilled through God's ordering of the actions of the rational agents involved. Secondly, God can bring about the object of prayer by causing it by his immediate divine action, outside of the causal order of nature, i.e., miraculously.²⁶ On Aquinas's account, an efficacious prayer will play a role either in explaining God's ordering of causes or in explaining God's direct action.²⁷

Given this account, what is the value of petitionary prayer? To begin with, petitionary prayer is a distinct way for us to cause things, by asking God for them, and, thus, it makes the causal order of things more complete and diverse, better displaying God's goodness. There is good reason to think that asking for something is a distinctive way of causing something, since we take requests to provide a *sui generis* sort of reason to do

²⁵ST I q.22 a.2; q.105 a.4, a.5. Aquinas's account of these different ways depends on his views about divine providence and the nature of divine and human agency, but I think that other Christian views of God's providence will draw distinctions along similar lines, albeit with some significant differences. Strict libertarians, for instance, would hold that God cannot directly cause any free action of an agent, but they can still allow for God to order the actions of rational agents in some sense. The Molinist, who holds that God can foreknow what a creature would freely do in any circumstance, can allow for a strong providential ordering, since God can (at least in many cases) set up circumstances in which the agent would freely do the action requested. Flint offers both a general Molinist account of providence (Flint, *Divine Providence*, chapter 2) and a Molinist account of God's response to petitionary prayer (Ibid., 216–228). The anti-Molinist libertarian cannot allow for such a strong degree of control over free actions, but he can still allow for some weaker sense of ordering insofar as he can allow for God to have some kind of influence, such as ensuring that the rational agent is aware of all the reasons in favor of acting in the way requested by the petitioner when the agent makes her free choice.

²⁶ST I q.105 a.6–8. On Aquinas's account, there is a third case: when the object of prayer is a spiritual blessing, not something natural, God brings it about through his order of grace (ST I q.105 a.7, ad 1., a.8). This can happen either directly or through some agent or instrument. For Thomas, this third case is distinct from God's working of miracles, since it involves things which do not belong to the order of nature. For him, miracles involve God's acting on natural things in ways that exceed the power of nature.

²⁷Other metaphysical accounts of the ways in which God and creatures can causally interact would result in different account of the ways in which God might respond to prayer. There are, however, alternative accounts of the ways in which God might causally respond to prayer that can be employed by these other metaphysical accounts, so I will concentrate on the nature and value of petitionary prayer, not the mechanisms by which God might respond to it. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the way in which God can respond to prayers depends on one's views about whether God is in time and whether God has foreknowledge of future contingents. On Aquinas's atemporal view of God's knowledge, there is one unified providential plan that encompasses all of time and includes all causes (cf. ST I q.14 a.13; q. 22; q.103 a.5–8; q.105 a.6). On this sort of view, prayers are already factored into God's overall plan, just as other creaturely activities are. On accounts on which God is in time but has complete foreknowledge, God may also have already factored prayers into the divine plan. Alternatively, God's response to prayer may always take place at (or after) the time of request. On views which deny foreknowledge, God's action in response to a prayer will never be temporally prior to the prayer.

something, a reason that is not reducible to independent facts about the interests of the people involved or the overall good.²⁸ When a colleague of mine asks me to attend her talk, I have a new reason to attend her talk, a reason that I did not have before, even if I already knew that her talk would be worth attending and that she would like to have me there. Similarly, when my son asks me to go to the park with him, that gives me a new reason to go to the park with him, even if I already knew that my son wants me to go to the park with him and that going to the park with him would be good for us. Moreover, sometimes a request gives me a reason to do something I would not otherwise have done. If my son asks me to read him a storybook I do not particularly enjoy reading (say, *The Cat in the Hat*), then I am likely to read it *because* he asked me to, even though I would have preferred to read *Goodnight Moon*, a storybook that I enjoy more and that he would enjoy just as much. If no request had been made and I was simply assessing the situation and our interests, I would be willing to read *Goodnight Moon*, but not *The Cat in the Hat*. Once my son has asked me to read *The Cat in the Hat*, however, I will agree to this, because his request has given me a new reason to read it. In general, then, asking for something, in appropriate conditions, provides an additional reason for that thing to come about, even for someone who already knows all the other relevant details of the situation, as an omniscient being would. When I act in response to a request, the request serves as a distinctive sort of cause or explanation for why the thing requested came about.²⁹

What, then, are the conditions under which my asking for something will provide a reason for someone to bring it about? Asking is not always

²⁸I am not going to get into the vexed question of what a cause is or defend a particular notion of causation. Instead, I will simply provisionally employ a usage according to which something is a cause if it is a crucial explanatory factor of the effect in question. If something is a cause, then its explanatory work cannot be fully reduced to some other explanatory factor, since for it to be a cause the effect needs to depend, in some important way, on it. A cause explains why something is or why something comes about: it is an appropriate answer to a why question. This notion of causation is very close to Thomas's Aristotelian understanding of causation (cf. *De Potentia* 5.1 Respondeo; *Sententia Libri Metaphysicae* V, lectio 3). It also captures the close connection between causation and explanation that is present in ordinary language and thought, even if it fails to fit with a number of definitions in contemporary philosophy. If this usage of cause offends, then feel free to read "crucial explanatory factor" in place of "cause."

²⁹My account of the additional reasons for doing something that requests provide is along the same lines as the account of petitionary prayer that Flint develops (Flint, *Divine Providence*, chap. 10). Flint discusses how a prayer could shift the balance in favor of divine action, relative to a counterfactual situation where a prayer is not offered. The example he employs comes from Acts, when Peter, in front of a large crowd, prayed for a lame man to be healed (Acts 3:1–10). In this case, Flint claims that "[God] saw that [responding to Peter's request by curing the lame man] would lead to many good consequences, while failing to do so would lead to many bad ones" (Flint, *Divine Providence*, 225). Thus, there were significant additional reasons for God to heal the lame man that would not have been present if Peter had not prayed. More generally, Flint notes that "what is good for God's creatures is in part dependent upon the circumstances in which they are placed, and prayer affects those circumstances" (ibid., 228). While Flint speaks in terms of changing the circumstances, I have preferred to speak of the request as causing or giving an additional reason for something to come about. Despite this, the basic point is similar.

enough, otherwise request fulfillment would be trivial: any request would be fulfilled as long as its object came about, even if the request plays no explanatory role in bringing that thing about. If I ask the sun to rise for me tomorrow and the sun rises, then the sun will have risen in response to my request. To be efficacious, the request must play an explanatory role in bringing about the thing requested. Imagine a gambler who comes up to a hockey player and asks him to ensure that the player's team loses, offering a reward. If the player refuses to aid the gambler and walks away in disgust, then the gambler's request is not going to be efficacious, even if the player's team loses. The gambler's inducements did not, on this scenario, give the player any reason to lose. They played no explanatory role with respect to the outcome of the game. The gambler would not be willing to give the player a reward if approached after the game. If, on the other hand, the player agrees to work for defeat in return for a reward, then the request is taken as a reason to lose and will play an explanatory role in his team's defeat. In general, if someone does not take my request as a reason to bring something about, then my request will not be efficacious, since it will not explain why that thing came about.

So, under what sort of conditions will a request tend to be efficacious in bringing about its object? The sort of requests that give the petitioned person a new reason to act are requests that ask for an appropriate object, ask in a suitable sort of manner, and fit with the nature of the relationship. If the request is to be effective, it needs to ask for an object that is both grantable by the person petitioned and taken to be good by that person. When my son asks me to find him a living dinosaur to see, he is asking me for something I cannot grant, and so I cannot bring about his request, even though I may want to. When he asks me to let him eat a whole bag of candy, he is asking for something that I could grant, but will not because I do not think it would be good for him. Since I do not think what he is asking for is good, his request will have little efficacy.³⁰ In some cases, the request may, in its own right, lead me to regard something as good or preferable that I would have otherwise seen as bad or less than preferable, as when I agreed to read *The Cat in the Hat* in the example I discussed above. The manner of the request can also have a large influence on whether the request is efficacious. If my son screams at me to get him some milk, I may not be responsive, even though I would grant his request if he asked politely. Under normal circumstances, asking for a glass of milk politely gives me more of a reason to get him a glass of milk. The fact that I will not get my son a glass of milk until he asks politely, even though I know he wants milk and milk would be good for him, is, once again, a sign that a properly made request can give a new reason to act even to someone who

³⁰As long, of course, as I am willing to endure the consequences of refusing the request. Note also that I might be mistaken about what's good in a given situation, so that what I take to be good and what *is* good come apart. The good and the apparent good will, however, always be the same for God, since on the understanding I am employing God is taken to be both omniscient and omnibenevolent.

already knows (even knows perfectly) the condition and psychological states of the petitioner. Finally, the request should also fit with the character of the relationship between the petitioner and the person petitioned. When my waiter at a restaurant asks me to fill out a form evaluating the restaurant and his performance, his request gives me a good reason to fill out the form, since this sort of request fits with the nature of our relationship. If, however, he asks me to watch his dog for a month, I will not think that his request gives me much of a reason to watch his dog, since it goes well beyond the bounds of our rather limited relationship.

Scripture and the Christian tradition seem to take the constraints on God's responses to prayers to be analogous to the constraints found in petitions to human agents. On the traditional Christian view, the object requested, the relationship the petitioner has to God, and the manner in which she asks all affect God's response to a request, much as they affect our responses to requests.³¹ Prayers that ask for an appropriate object, in a suitable manner, and within the context of a relationship with God are the paradigmatic kind of prayers to which God responds. This makes sense. Asking for something, as I have argued, gives the petitioner a distinctive way of bringing something about and we think that granting appropriate requests is a good characteristic in human beings. Since, on the Christian view, our good characteristics are likenesses of God's goodness, we have reason to think that the characteristic of granting appropriate requests belongs to the divine goodness. God displays his goodness in responding to appropriately offered prayers and, by responding to these prayers, he allows petitioners to bring things about in a distinctive and valuable way.³²

Aquinas offers several additional reasons for God to respond to prayers. Prayers coming from someone who has a good relationship with God and is asking appropriately for something good express good desires that ultimately come from God. As the author of these desires, God acts fittingly

³¹ST IIa-IIae q.83 a.1, corpus. On the object of prayer cf. James 4:3, 2 Corinthians 12:7–9, Romans 8:26; on one's relationship with God, cf. Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4, Matthew 18:23–35, Proverbs 28:9, Isaiah 1:15; on the manner of one's request, cf. Luke 18:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 1:6, Psalm 101:18. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG), I.III, 96.

³²My account of the value of petitionary prayer has some features in common with that offered in Smith and Yip, "Partnership with God." We both agree that prayer can add a distinctive sort of value to the world that would not be present otherwise. The sort of value they claim prayer adds is "partnership with God." Smith and Yip take sincere prayer to involve a vow of partnership with God. The person praying commits herself to trying to share in moral agency (to the degree possible) with respect to the object requested (Smith and Yip, "Partnership with God," 404–407). When possible, she will act to help bring about what she requested. Similarly, on my account prayer allows us to make a distinctive causal contribution to the world, a contribution that would be missing if God always acted on his own without taking our requests into account. The account of Smith and Yip, however, focuses more on the way in which prayer leads the petitioner to exercise further causal powers and less on the way in which prayer itself can be a distinctive way of causing something. They also do not fully situate the case of petitionary prayer within the larger context of creaturely causation.

in fulfilling them.³³ For a Christian petitioner, the friendship we have with God gives him a reason to fulfill our desires, as fulfilling the friend's desires is characteristic of friendship. Finally, petitionary prayer helps us to see God as the source of every good thing. The Christian sees God as the father who gives good gifts to his children and asks believing that she will receive. In receiving her object of prayer from God, the Christian's belief that God gives good gifts is strengthened.³⁴ Thus, we have a metaphysical account that offers a reasonable explanation of why God can and should respond to petitionary prayer.³⁵

It is important to note that on my account a prayer can be efficacious even when what is requested would have come about without that prayer. On this point I agree with Scott Davison, who maintains that the counterfactual dependence which much of the literature takes as a requirement for any effectual prayer is too strong: prayers can be effective even in some cases where their objects would have been secured without prayer.³⁶ We can see this by considering requests in human relationships. I may be planning to take out the trash in any case, but if my wife asks me to take it out, I will respond to her request and take it out (in large part) because she asked me to do so. In my view, her request should be regarded as successful and efficacious even though she asked me to do something that I would likely have done anyway. Her request is an explanatory cause of my action. I have a reason to take out the trash that I did not have before. My taking out the trash will now be done in response to her request and as something

³³Cf. Philippians 2:13. There may also be reasons for God to answer prayers that fail to meet some of these requirements, but I am focusing on paradigmatic cases of prayers to which God responds.

³⁴Cf. SCG, I.III, 95. One might object that (seemingly) unanswered prayers can have an opposite and counterbalancing effect on the petitioner, decreasing her belief in God's goodness and care for her. As I note below (n35), I am focusing on the metaphysics of prayer and assuming that there is a satisfactory Christian theology of prayer that would give an epistemological framework for discerning whether and how prayers have been answered (and thus a framework for addressing these sorts of objections).

³⁵I am offering a general metaphysical account of the value of prayer, not an epistemological account of precisely when we should take prayers to be answered. In fact, only the last of the reasons I outlined for the value of petitionary prayer relies primarily on the petitioner knowing the prayer has been answered. I am, however, assuming that Scripture and the Christian tradition, combined with personal and communal experience, can provide the Christian believer with the sort of epistemological and theological criteria necessary to allow her to discern, in many cases, whether a prayer has been answered or not. There are a number of skeptical objections that question whether an ordinary believer could achieve such knowledge (outlined, for instance, in Scott Davison, "Petitionary Prayer," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Michael Rea and Thomas Flint [Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009], 293–280), but addressing these would require a detailed theological account of how God and the Christian believer communicate. Since my aim is the modest task of showing why it is reasonable to believe that God responds to prayer and not the more daunting task of giving precise criteria for determining when prayers are answered, I do not think I need to develop the sort of detailed Christian theology of prayer that would be necessary to answer these skeptical worries.

³⁶Davison, "Petitionary Prayer," 287–291. Articles that seem to accept this counterfactual requirement include Hoffman, "On Petitionary Prayer," and Murray and Meyers, "Ask and It Will be Given to You."

meant to maintain and support our relationship. If God similarly responds to appropriate requests, then they should also be counted as efficacious.³⁷ Of course, if in every case where I responded to my wife's request it was to do something that I would have done in any case, someone might call into question whether her requests were in fact efficacious. Similarly, if in every case the good brought about as a result of petitionary prayer would have been brought about in some similar manner in any case, one might doubt the efficacy of petitionary prayer. I will argue below that there are many important goods that cannot be brought about in the absence of petitionary prayer. The efficacy of petitionary prayers does not require counterfactual dependence, but many important cases of petitionary prayer do involve counterfactual dependence.

On my view, even appropriately made prayers will not always be either sufficient or necessary for bringing about their objects. A believer may appropriately petition God for something God would have brought about anyway. In such a case, I claim that the prayer is efficacious since it gives God a reason to bring that thing about, but I concede that the prayer was not necessary with respect to the effect, since the effect would have been brought about even without the prayer. On the other hand, sometimes a person may earnestly and devoutly pray for something good, but God may have outweighing reasons for not bringing that thing about, so that the prayer is not sufficient to achieve its object. Not all the prayers that give God reason to do something actually succeed in bringing that thing about. One might worry that the lack of any universal connection between petitionary prayer and either sufficiency or necessity removes prayer's force. I think this worry can be assuaged. On my account, making an efficacious prayer is not trivially easy, since a prayer will be efficacious only if it gives God a reason for doing something and there are many prayers people can (and do) make that do not do that.

The conditions under which we think that God has answered a prayer should parallel the conditions under which we think that a human being has responded to some request. These conditions should not be relaxed in the divine case, but they should also not be made unreasonably stringent.

³⁷My aim here is simply to show that not all efficacious prayers need to involve counterfactual dependence, not to try to delineate exactly how much of explanatory weight a request needs to have in order to be taken to be efficacious. I maintain that it has to have some explanatory weight, since it has to give the person petitioned a reason to do what they do. This, however, is compatible with reasons having various degrees of strength (with some being quite weak) and, thus, with reasons having various degrees of causal or explanatory power. One could try to formulate the efficacy of a request or prayer in terms of the extent to which it raised the probability of the thing coming about, but I think that such a probabilistic account could not successfully deal with cases in which the request was an explanatory factor but there were also other sufficient reasons for what came about. I want to allow for something to be part of the explanation even when the object brought about might have happened with the same probability even without that thing. I would definitely give my children gifts for Christmas regardless of whether they asked for them or not, so my children asking for presents does not raise the probability that they will receive presents. Their requests do, however, play an explanatory role in accounting for why I got them gifts and will also help to determine how many gifts I get them and of what kind.

I think that requests to other human agents, even when appropriately made, are not always necessary or sufficient for bringing about their objects. Some appropriate requests to other human beings are efficacious, but bring about something that would have happened in any case (such as my wife's request for me to take out the trash or my children's request for presents on Christmas). Such requests are sufficient to bring about the effects they request, but not necessary for these effects. Other requests are appropriately made, but can be outweighed by other competing reasons. My colleague may have appropriately asked me to attend her talk, giving me a strong reason to go to it, but I may have already committed myself to commenting on another paper scheduled at the same time as her session.³⁸ In summary, requests and prayers are, as Aquinas puts it, conducive to producing their effects, but they are not always necessary or sufficient. There are, of course, further philosophical questions about how asking works and how reasons operate, but my contention is that the divine case is no worse off or more mysterious than the human one. If requests to other human beings can be causally efficacious and explanatory in a distinctive way, then requests to God could be as well.³⁹

V. Can Petitionary Prayer Make a Difference?

In response to the account I have given concerning the value of petitionary prayer, the objector might concede that there are reasons for God to answer prayers, but maintain that there are no good reasons for God to refrain from giving the sorts of goods brought about by prayer to those who do not pray. God should give similar goods to everyone regardless of whether they pray. David Basinger, for instance, argues that while God may withhold certain discretionary goods until they are requested, a good God could not wait until people pray to supply them with basic needs

³⁸One could claim that there is a sense in which appropriately made requests are sufficient to bring about their objects, since they give the person petitioned a reason to act that is sufficient to bring about the object requested unless there is some outside interference. I think that this, however, amounts to no more than saying that appropriately made requests give one a reason to do something, since a reason will, in the absence of any other competing reasons, be sufficient to motivate me to act on it. I agree that both appropriately made prayers and requests are sufficient in this weaker sense, but deny that they are sufficient in a stronger sense.

³⁹Someone could, of course, be skeptical of whether requests to someone can in fact provide her with a reason or have any causal or explanatory force. Such skepticism could issue either from general questions about what reasons are and how they are compatible with free action (cf. Davison, "Petitionary Prayer," 289–292) or from a much more general skepticism about whether human psychological states, such as "knowing that my wife has asked me to take out the trash," can play any causal or explanatory role in human action (cf. Stephen Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985]). I will not, in this paper, attempt to offer any defense of asking against these skeptical objections, since that would go far beyond the issue of petitionary prayer. I do, however, want to note that I take the burden of proof to rest firmly on those who deny that requests (or, more generally, human interactions and human psychological states) can explain actions. Given the widespread conviction that requests do make a difference to human behavior, I think that a reasonable defense of petitionary prayer need only defend the conditional claim that I have put forward.

such as food, health, and shelter.⁴⁰ In response, I first want to note that the view I am advancing allows that God may provide many of the same things he gives to those who pray to those who do not petition him, particularly the sort of things with which Basinger is concerned. Jesus claims that our Father in heaven “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”⁴¹

On my view, however, the person who receives food, health, and shelter because she asks God for them gains additional value from these goods, value that the person who receives but does not ask misses. The goods of the two people in question are not, on my view, equally good, even if the two people are equally healthy and well-fed. The person who prays for these things receives her goods as part of a friendship with God. Receiving these goods strengthens her trust in God’s providence and further develops her relationship with him. Now it may still be better for God to give certain kinds of goods to the person who does not ask than to withhold such goods, but the goods brought about apart from prayer will not be as good. When it comes to material goods, my account is not committed to any general position about whether God should (or actually does) give those who pray more of these material goods than those who do not.⁴² My argument is simply attempting to offer a plausible account for why God could give some goods in response to prayer, by articulating the value of things brought about through prayer. I am not addressing the evidential problem of evil and, thus, I am not going to consider whether the distribution of goods we actually observe is compatible with the existence of such a God or make global claims about which sorts of general distribution of goods are best or allowable.

I do, however, want to argue that, on the framework I have laid out, it is plausible to think that some goods are counterfactually dependent on prayer, either because they would not be good if they did not come about

⁴⁰Basinger expresses this worry in several of his articles (cf. David Basinger, “God Does Not Necessarily Respond to Prayer” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Ray van Arragon [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003], 260–262 and David Basinger, “Petitionary Prayer: A Response to Murray and Meyers,” *Religious Studies* 31 [1995], 475–484).

⁴¹Matthew 5:45.

⁴²The evidence of Scripture and the Christian tradition is much more ambiguous when it comes to the connection between material goods and prayer and righteousness than a proponent of the health and wealth gospel would have one believe. Sometimes material prosperity is seen as a mark of favor in the Psalms, but often the wicked appear to be flourishing while the righteous struggle. The story of Job, of course, is the paradigmatic example of the danger of confusing worldly success and status with spiritual health and righteousness. Augustine offers an important and influential account for why God sometimes, but not always, gives temporal goods to those who ask. He claims that “if God did not bestow [the good things of life] with patent liberality on some who ask Him, we could possibly argue that such things did not depend on His power. On the other hand, if He lavished them on all who asked, we might have the impression that God is to be served only for the gifts He bestows. In that case, the service of God would not make us religious, but rather covetous and greedy” (Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. D. B. Zema and G. G. Walsh [Fathers of the Church Series, Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1950], 1.8).

in response to prayer or because they cannot be brought about without prayer. There certainly seem to be some cases in which we would judge that something is good only (or primarily) because it is prayed for and, thus, is something that God would be unlikely to cause absent prayer. Biblical examples include Elijah's request that God rain fire down from heaven on his water-drenched sacrifice and Gideon's request that in the morning the fleece be wet while the surrounding threshing floor was dry.⁴³ In both cases the petitioner asked God to show himself by producing a certain sign. In both cases, the value of the thing brought about consists mostly in its functioning as a sign of God's presence and of his responsiveness to the request, not in some good that it has apart from its function as sign. There is little reason to think that a fleece being wet or a dead bull going up in flames would be particularly good or of any great value if no request to God had been made. Thus, in cases like these, where the prayer asks for God to bring about as a sign something that would not otherwise be valuable, it is plausible to think that what is requested is valuable primarily insofar as it is being brought about in response to prayer and would not be brought about otherwise.

Do these sorts of cases involve only things of little intrinsic weight for good or evil? The Bible clearly takes there to be some cases in which it was within God's power to bring about (or fail to bring about) something momentous, but he refrained from doing so, because it was better for the thing in question not to be brought about than for it to be brought about apart from petitionary prayer. For instance, Scripture indicates that the city of Nineveh would have been devastated, if its inhabitants had not listened to the words of Jonah and turned from their evil ways (Jonah 3:1–10).⁴⁴ If, as the biblical account claims, physical harm to the inhabitants would have been the appropriate and just judgment for their evil actions, then the continued flourishing of Nineveh absent repentance and prayer to God would have been worse than the city's destruction. It is difficult to find an agreed-upon standpoint between the traditional Christian believer and a non-Christian objector from which we could evaluate either this particular claim or claims of this sort more generally, so I will simply point out that such cases are at least logically possible. I have already argued that the value of an event depends not only on the intrinsic nature of the event, but also on its circumstance and the causal factors responsible for it. A situation in which someone does not pray will have different causal and circumstantial factors than one where someone does: if these factors are sufficiently negative, they may well outweigh the intrinsic value of the event in favor of some other occurrence.

Given the difficulties of finding a common value standard, I will now leave aside cases where something that is good when brought about in

⁴³1 Kings 18:30–40; Judges 6:36–40.

⁴⁴The prolongation of Hezekiah's life in response to prayer is another similarly striking example (Isaiah 38:1–8).

response to prayer may not be good otherwise and consider cases in which some good cannot be achieved at all apart from prayer. Many of the goods that Christians pray for are the sorts of things that God cannot give to those who do not pray. Forgiveness, repentance, and the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit are things that can be brought about only through our desire for and acceptance of them and through our expression of that desire in prayer. If these things are as valuable as Christians hold them to be, then some of the best and most important things requested cannot be brought about apart from prayer.

Consider first a human case of forgiveness: I negligently lose my wife's watch. I apologize to her and show how I will take better care of her things in the future and she consequently forgives me. In this case, I am requesting that she forgive me because I am sorry for what I have done, have shown how I will change my behavior, and have apologized. I ask that she forgive me because of my apology. As Richard Swinburne and John Hare have argued, standard cases of forgiveness such as this one involve three tasks for the offender: the offender *repents*, internally acknowledging his guilt; *apologizes*, externally admitting his guilt, standardly to the victim; and, when appropriate and possible, *makes reparation*, attempting to remove the harms brought about by the offense.⁴⁵ The victim then offers forgiveness in response to these actions. This raises the question of whether the offender must complete all these tasks in order to be forgiven. If, for instance, I deny that I was at fault for the loss of the watch or refuse to apologize, could my wife still forgive me?

On a number of accounts, forgiveness is seen as a matter of "relinquishing resentment or some other form of morally inflected anger."⁴⁶ In this sense, the victim can forgive regardless of whether the perpetrator tries to make good the offense, since forgiveness is just a matter of the victim forswearing retributive attitudes. Avoiding the need for retribution is

⁴⁵Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25; John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 226–227. Hare and Swinburne discuss a fourth task, doing penance, where the offender performs some further action that goes beyond reparations. If, for instance, I not only bought my wife another watch but also bought her a bottle of wine and flowers, I would be doing penance in addition to making reparation. Hare suggests that penance helps the offender to accomplish his goal of making good for the offense. The offender's aim in carrying out his tasks is to make it so that "the victim holds herself [at least] equally content with two states of the world: the first contains the offence together with the offender's repentance, apology, reparation, and penance; the second contains neither" (Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 231). I have left penance out of my account both because I am not sure whether it is a constitutive (or even typical) element of forgiveness and because it is not crucial for my argument.

⁴⁶Paul M. Hughes, "Forgiveness," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/forgiveness/>, section 2. This view goes back to Joseph Butler (Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, in *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, Joseph Butler, D.C.L., Late Bishop of Durham*, ed. Samuel Halifax [New York: Carter, 1846]) and has a number of contemporary adherents as well, e.g., Peter A. French et al., "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1982), 503–516; Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness, Mercy, and the Retributive Emotions," *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 7.2 (1988), 3–14; Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 561–556.

not, however, the only goal of forgiveness. I agree with Paul M. Hughes in thinking that the “main purpose [of forgiveness] is the re-establishment or resumption of a relationship ruptured by wrongdoing.”⁴⁷ This goal applies to both weighty offenses, such as adultery, and less serious wrongs, such as the loss of my wife’s watch.⁴⁸ The possibility of reconciliation depends on how seriously and intrinsically the offender’s wrongdoing affects his relationship with the victim and on what the victim and the offender are willing to do to restore the relationship.

Can a victim accomplish both goals of forgiveness in the absence of repentance, apology, and reparation by the offender?⁴⁹ This may be possible in cases when the offense does not strike at the core of the relationship. If I lose my wife’s watch, my wife may forgive me for it without an explicit acknowledgement of guilt or apology. She can decide not to hold it against me and deal with the harm caused by the loss of the watch on her own. In such a case, our relationship will not be severely affected by my negligent action and our relationship may be restored even if I do not complete the tasks of the offender.

In cases that strike more deeply at the heart of the relationship, achieving both goals of forgiveness is not possible without true repentance and apology on the part of the wrongdoer. The relationship of Dolly and Stiva Oblonsky in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* provides a good illustration. Early on in the novel, Anna Karenina is attempting to convince Dolly to forgive her husband Stiva for an adulterous liaison. Dolly asks whether, if Anna were in her position, she would forgive him even if he entered into another “infatuation” and Anna replies:

“Yes, I would forgive. I wouldn’t be the same, no, but I would forgive, and forgive in such a way as if it hadn’t happened, hadn’t happened at all.”

“Well, naturally,” Dolly quickly interrupted, as if she were saying something she had thought more than once, “otherwise it wouldn’t be forgiveness. If you forgive, it’s completely, completely.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷Hughes, “Forgiveness,” section 2. This second end of forgiveness may seem to apply only to cases where there is a close relationship between the victim and the offender, as with offenses between family members, friends, or colleagues. Restricting this second goal to such cases would not undermine my argument, since, on the Christian understanding of the world, there is supposed to be a close relationship between each human being and God. John Hare, however, makes a strong case for thinking that we can apply the connection between forgiveness and relationships even to seemingly superficial relationships, like one’s relationship with fellow bus passengers (Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 233–234).

⁴⁸Cf. Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 226.

⁴⁹This is a different question from asking whether the victim *should* in some such or all such circumstances forgive the offender. Swinburne, among others, claims that such forgiveness is never appropriate as it is tantamount to condoning the offense or demeaning one’s own values (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 86). Since I will argue that, in the most important cases, achieving both goals of forgiveness is not possible without repentance on the part of the offender, I am not taking a position on whether the victim should consider forgiving an unrepentant offender in certain circumstances.

⁵⁰Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001), 70–71.

Dolly then decides to forgive Stiva in this complete way, putting his adultery entirely out of her mind. Thus, she bears no resentment to Stiva and accomplishes the first goal of forgiveness: the foreswearing of retributive attitudes toward the offender. Nevertheless, although Stiva regrets the disorder in his family life that his actions have caused and attempts to seem remorseful to Dolly, he does not actually repent and soon continues pursuing liaisons. Due to this, the relationship between Dolly and Stiva is still severely damaged, even though Dolly bears no ill will or feeling towards Stiva. Stiva's actions and attitudes make it impossible for their marriage to have the mutual trust and openness that characterizes the exemplar marriage in the book, that of Levin and Kitty. For the second goal of forgiveness, the restoration of relationship, to be achieved, Stiva would have to truly repent: he would need to completely acknowledge his guilt, offer a true apology, and make real efforts towards reparation.

On the traditional Christian understanding of the world, human beings are in a situation similar to that of an adulterer like Stiva. On this view, human beings are in a relationship with God that is based on a covenant, where our part is to keep God's law.⁵¹ However, we consistently fail to follow God's law: we do not love God or our neighbor as we ought. Since our relationship to God is based around keeping his law, our failure to do so strikes at the heart of this relationship. Given the impact our wrongdoing has on our relationship with God, we must acknowledge our sin and ask for forgiveness and transformation if we are to be forgiven and our relationship with God is to be restored. The goals of forgiveness cannot be achieved until we begin to desire and ask for forgiveness.⁵² If we do not ask for or desire forgiveness, we can, at best, be in a situation like Stiva's, where there is no retribution, but our relationship is still severely damaged. Thus, the fullness of forgiveness is the sort of good that cannot be given to people regardless of their condition. If this Christian view concerning the status of our relationship with God is correct, we cannot obtain full forgiveness without asking for it.

Forgiveness is not the only object of Christian prayer that is like this. The related goods of transformative repentance and spiritual change are similarly dependent on our asking God for them and accepting them. Moreover, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the aids given to Christians to help them to follow God's law, can be given only if we accept them and desire them.⁵³ In some cases they may be given without an explicit request to God, but there will always be a desire for them and that desire will usually be expressed through prayer. God can give these goods to us if we ask for

⁵¹Cf. Romans 1–3. For an explication of this idea, see Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 225–226. For further discussion of the meaning of covenant, see N. T. Wright, "Creation and Covenant," in *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 21–39.

⁵²This raises the important and hotly disputed question of whether and to what degree God can change the desires of such people, a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵³1 Corinthians 12–14, Galatians 5:22–26.

them, but he cannot give them to us if we do not want them or think we need them. God has good reasons for giving things in response to prayer and some of his most valuable gifts (according to Christian belief) cannot be similarly given to those who do not pray.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen that on Aquinas's reasonable understanding of God's power and of the goodness of the world, an order of created things which includes creaturely causation and petitionary prayer is better than one in which God brings all things about immediately. Creaturely causation shows God's power, fulfills created things, and makes the world better reflect God's goodness. Prayer allows us to cause good things in a distinctive way: by asking God for them. God brings about what we pray for either through his ordering of causes or through direct divine action. Further, some of the most important goods (according to Christian belief) can only be brought about through prayer. I have attempted to give a coherent and plausible account of how petitionary prayer can be effective, given the traditional Christian view of God. On the account I have given, asking for things is an important part of our relationship with God, just as it is in our human relationships. If the traditional Christian understanding of God and the world is reasonable, then petitionary prayer is reasonable. If it is correct, then we should pray.⁵⁴

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