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Joshua Hoffman

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## On Petitionary Prayer

Erratum  
article

# ON PETITIONARY PRAYER

Joshua Hoffman

The traditional philosophical conception of the God of Christianity and Judaism is of a being who has necessary existence, and who is essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. There has been much discussion in the recent literature of these fundamental divine attributes, discussion which has focused on the question of whether or not the attributes in question are internally and mutually consistent. Much less has been said about another aspect of traditional theology, namely, petitionary prayer, or the practice of making a request of God in the hope that one's request will be granted, and in the belief that some such requests, at least, are efficacious. My main purpose in this paper is a relatively modest one. It is to show that what I take to be a necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer can be met on the traditional conception of God, and this despite the existence of certain plausible-seeming arguments to the contrary. The intuition behind this necessary condition is that if a prayer is efficacious, then God brings about what is prayed for *because* it is prayed for, and not just for the sake of that which is prayed for. This implies that God's bringing about a prayed-for state of affairs, *s*, is contingent, when one's prayer is efficacious, upon *s*'s being prayed for. It also seems to me to imply that one's praying for *s* is contingent. These two implications taken together support the following, which is the necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer the possible satisfaction of which, I am concerned to show, can be defended on the traditional conception of God:

If a prayer for a state of affairs, *s*, is efficacious, then there is a possible world in which that prayer is not made, and in which *s* does not obtain.<sup>1</sup>

Call this necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer condition *NC*. The first argument which purports to rule out the satisfaction of *NC* is one which emphasizes the incompatibility of God's goodness with petitionary prayer. This argument, or one like it, has recently been discussed by Eleonore Stump.<sup>2</sup> It will be evident to those who have read her important and interesting paper that my response to the argument (and to the version of it which follows) is very different from hers. This argument (call it argument *A*) goes as follows:



If one prays for some state of affairs, *s*, which God subsequently brings about, then since God must create the best of all possible worlds,<sup>3</sup> He would have brought about *s* even if one had not prayed for it. Hence, in those cases where one's prayers are answered, those prayers are not really efficacious. And if one prays for a state of affairs which God does not subsequently bring about, then, obviously, in this case, too, one's prayer is not efficacious.

As Professor Stump has expressed the conclusion of this argument, "So either an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God has predetermined this state of affairs or he hasn't; and either way, asking for it seems to make no sense."<sup>4</sup>

It is important to take note of the fact that argument *A* presupposes that if God exists, He creates *the* best of all possible worlds, i.e., that there is a unique such world. Presumably, the idea behind argument *A* is that if state of affairs *s* is the sort of state of affairs which God would bring about in response to prayer, then it's the sort of state of affairs which belongs in the best of all possible worlds, whether it's prayed for or not. However, once this assumption about God's creating the best of all possible worlds is made, there appears to be a fairly easy way to disarm argument *A*. We have said that God is to be understood as having necessary existence and as being essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Let us add to this, or, if one prefers, infer from this, that necessarily, if God exists, then He creates the best world that He can. If He can create a best possible world, and if, as argument *A* assumes, there is only one such world, then it follows that necessarily, if God exists, then He creates the best possible world. In other words, there is only one possible world, and it is the one God creates. Returning to argument *A*, it will be recalled that the claim is made in *A* that since God creates the best of all possible worlds, He would have brought about what one prayed for (and which He in fact granted) even if one hadn't prayed for it. It is this conditional which is supposed to pose a threat to the possible satisfaction of *NC*. But given what we have just said about the implications of the presupposition made by *A* of a unique best possible world, it can be shown that this crucial conditional does not in fact pose any threat to the satisfaction of *NC* in the context of *A*. Because argument *A* presupposes that God of necessity creates the best of all possible worlds, and because it assumes that in the actual world one does pray for *s*, it follows that on the presuppositions made by argument *A*, it is *impossible*, in a broadly logical or metaphysical sense, for one to fail to pray for *s*. Thus, the crucial conditional in argument *A* contains an antecedent which is impossible. The standard interpretation of such conditionals is that they are true, but trivially so. The triviality of the conditional in *A* with which we are concerned can be seen if we note that on the presuppositions made by *A*, the following conditional is also (trivially) true: if one hadn't prayed

for  $s$ , God *would not* have brought about  $s$ . It is only if the consequent of the crucial conditional in  $A$  were to follow from its antecedent non-trivially that that conditional would pose any threat to the possible satisfaction of  $NC$ . This not being the case, no threat is in fact posed to the satisfaction of  $NC$  by argument  $A$ .

Yet while argument  $A$  is of no use to those who would argue that petitionary prayer is incoherent, perhaps it does appeal to some sound intuition that if it is necessarily true that God exists in the best of all possible worlds, then petitionary prayer *is* incoherent. Perhaps this intuition can be supported by means of an alternative argument. I would like to suggest such an argument (call it argument  $B$ ), which is stated as follows:

If a prayer for a state of affairs,  $s$ , is efficacious, then there is a possible world in which that prayer is not made, and in which  $s$  does not obtain. But if God necessarily creates the best of all possible worlds, then it is not the case that there is a prayer,  $p$ , and a prayed for state of affairs,  $s$ , such that  $s$  is prayed for in  $p$ , and  $s$  obtains, and, possibly,  $p$  is not made and  $s$  does not obtain. Hence, prayer is not possibly efficacious if it is necessarily true that God exists in the best of all possible worlds.

No doubt, some theologians would reject the requirement for the efficacy of prayer which  $B$  presupposes. Certainly Calvin and Luther would. My own sympathies are with argument  $B$ . Yet I am not too much concerned about argument  $B$  as a threat to the coherence of petitionary prayer. Since I do not accept the assertion that there is a unique best possible world, I would reject any defense of petitionary prayer which presupposed that there is one. And since argument  $B$  works only on that very presupposition, I am not worried by argument  $B$ . It is appropriate at this point for me to explain *why* I reject the idea of a unique best possible world.

Assume that there is at least one optimal possible world (I shall have more to say about this assumption below). Call this world,  $w_1$ . Presumably, what makes  $w_1$  an optimal world is that it contains a certain amount of good, or a certain proportion of good to evil. Whether such a world contains only good, or whether it contains a proportion of good to evil, is, of course, what is at issue in the debate over the problem of evil. I need take no stand on this issue, for, in any case,  $w_1$  contains good, and that is all I need presuppose for my argument. For not all of the contingent states of affairs that obtain in  $w_1$  either contain good or evil or any proportion of one over the other. In other words, some such states of affairs are morally neutral. For example, many of the motions of sub-atomic particles neither contain good nor evil, nor are the causes of any states of affairs which do. Furthermore, it is plausible that some states of affairs in  $w_1$  which are necessary for other states of affairs in  $w_1$  which contain good, could have failed to obtain without implying a decrease in the overall proportion of good

over evil. Take, for example, the state of affairs, *Jones exists*. Suppose that *Jones exists* obtains in  $w_1$  and is necessary for other states of affairs which obtain in  $w_1$  and which contain good, e.g., *Jones freely saves the drowning child*, and *Jones feels pleasure*. Nevertheless, it is clear that instead of Jones's having existed, Smith could have existed, where Smith is qualitatively indiscernible from Jones, that is, Jones and Smith have all of the same intrinsic and relational qualitative properties. Granting this possibility, to which I see no good objection, then whether Jones or Smith exists makes no moral difference. Hence, if a world in which Jones existed were an optimal world, then a world in which Smith existed would, other things being equal, also be an optimal world. For these reasons, I conclude that there cannot be a unique optimal or best possible world. Of course, a thorough-going rationalist would argue that every possible state of affairs entails every other possible state of affairs, and such a position is indeed incompatible with the forgoing argument. I think I am safe, however, in rejecting the rationalistic denial of the distinction between necessarily true and contingently true states of affairs.

The situation we have reached is this: the coherence of petitionary prayer can be defended only if it is denied that as a matter of necessity, God exists in the best possible world. At most, God's power, knowledge, and goodness imply that He exists in an optimal world. So now we must ask if there is a problem for petitionary prayer on the assumption that necessarily, God creates or exists in an optimal but not a uniquely optimal world. It might be thought that argument *B* can be reformulated in such a way as to pose a renewed threat to petitionary prayer on the assumption just mentioned. Consider the following argument (call it argument *C*):

If one prays for some state of affairs, *s*, which God subsequently brings about, then since God necessarily creates an optimal world, He would have brought about *s* even if one hadn't prayed for *s*. Hence, in those cases in which one's prayers are answered, one's prayers are not really efficacious. And if one prays for what God does not subsequently bring about, then, obviously, those prayers, too, are not efficacious.

Argument *C*, unlike argument *A*, does not assume that God must exist in the best of all possible worlds, thereby avoiding the difficulty we found in *A*. The crucial claim argument *C* makes is that for any prayed for state of affairs, *s*, which God brings about, He would have brought about *s* even if one hadn't prayed for it. Presumably, this claim has the implication that *s* obtains in every optimal world, i.e., in every possible world. As argued above, it is plausible that a prayer for a state of affairs, *s*, is efficacious only if it is possible for that prayer not to occur *and* for *s* not to obtain. Thus, if what argument *C* asserts is correct, petitionary prayer could not be efficacious if it were a necessary truth

that God creates an optimal world. And for this reason it might be thought that the efficacy of petitionary prayer is incompatible with God's goodness (together with the other divine attributes).

But is the crucial claim made by argument *C* in fact correct? I believe that the following considerations will show that it is not. Suppose that  $w_1$  is an optimal world, and that in  $w_1$  a state of affairs,  $s$ , is prayed for by a human being and subsequently brought about by God in response to this prayer. Assume, too, that  $s$  contains some good and no evil, and that  $s$  is not necessary for any other states of affairs which obtain in  $w_1$  and which contain overall more evil than  $s$  contains good. Thus, we are assuming that all things considered, that  $s$  obtains is good for  $w_1$ . Hence, a world,  $w_2$ , which differed from  $w_1$  only in that neither  $s$  nor whatever  $s$  is necessary for obtained in  $w_2$ , would be a worse world than  $w_1$ , unless there were in  $w_2$  some moral compensation for failure of  $s$  to obtain. If such compensation were not present in  $w_2$ , then  $w_2$  would not be an optimal world, and, therefore, would not on our assumptions even be a possible world. But it does not follow from this that  $s$  obtains in every possible world, i.e., in every optimal world. In the example just discussed, we supposed that  $w_2$  was lacking some good that  $w_1$  contained *without compensation*. But we can readily conceive of a world,  $w_3$ , that also differs from  $w_1$  in not containing  $s$ , but which contains exactly enough good from the state or states of affairs which replace  $s$  to compensate for the absence of  $s$ . In order to illustrate this claim, let us take a look at an example provided by Eleonore Stump. Stump is using the example to argue that "the fulfillment of [any] prayer would make the world either a worse or a better place."<sup>5</sup> Here is Stump's example:

"Take, for instance, the case of a little boy who prays for a jack-knife...if the little boy has prayed for a jack-knife, surely he will be happier if he gets it, either because he very much wants a jack-knife or because God has honored his request. Consequently, one could argue that fulfilling the request makes the world better in virtue of making the one praying happier."<sup>6</sup>

But let's continue the story. Suppose that the little boy's sister subsequently plays with the jack-knife and cuts her finger. Assume, too, that her unhappiness at suffering a cut finger exactly counterbalances the happiness of her brother at receiving the jack-knife and having his prayer answered. If these are the only morally relevant differences between two worlds, one in which we have the jack-knife and the cut finger, and the other in which there is no jack-knife and no cut finger, then they are morally on a par. Of course, if need be, we can make the story more complicated in order to ensure that this is so. Thus, with respect to our two worlds, one is an optimal world if and only if the other is. And as our extended version of Stump's story shows, it is not true that the

granting of the little boy's prayer must "make the world either a worse or a better place than it would have otherwise been." It could be that the failure to grant the little boy's prayer results in a world no worse and no better than a world in which it was granted. I conclude, therefore, that these considerations refute the crucial claim made by argument *C*, viz., that if God brings about a prayed for state of affairs in some optimal world, then He would of necessity have brought it about even if it hadn't been prayed for.

The conception of petitionary prayer at which argument *C* was aimed, and which has emerged unscathed from its attack, is that necessarily, God creates or exists in an optimal world. There is no unique best possible world, and not every good which God brings about or evil which He prevents in response to prayer in a given possible world is brought about by Him or prevented by Him in every possible world. Therefore, the way is open to the satisfaction of condition *NC* for the efficacy of petitionary prayer.

It might be argued that this defense of petitionary prayer is incomplete, in that it does not say anything about prayer being *freely* made, in the sense of freedom that libertarians endorse. Eleonore Stump, for example, assumes human freedom of this sort in her defense of petitionary prayer, on the grounds that "ordinary Christian believers" make this assumption, and because "adopting the opposite view enormously complicates the attempt to understand and justify petitionary prayer."<sup>7</sup> In response, I would like to point out, first, that I do not claim in this paper to show that petitionary prayer can be defended against any possible objection to its coherence; I have argued only that a particular necessary condition for its coherence is satisfied. Secondly, while I am not sure Stump's claims about the need to assume libertarianism are correct, I have deliberately avoided taking a stand on this issue. Finally, what I have argued thus far about petitionary prayer is consistent either with a libertarian or a compatibilist theory of human freedom, just as long as the fact that human beings are free in the libertarian sense is consistent with its being necessarily true that if God exists, He exists in an optimal world.

Some philosophers who have descended into the murky depths of the free will defense to the problem of evil, and I especially have in mind here Alvin Plantinga, have argued that even though there is a best possible world or are optimal worlds, because human beings are free in the libertarian sense, it is not necessarily true that God exists in an optimal world.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a possible objection to my defense of petitionary prayer is that (i) human beings are free in the libertarian sense; and (ii) consequently, it is not necessarily true that God exists in an optimal world. I happen to think that Plantinga's arguments for (ii) are unsound, that the inference from (i) to (ii) is invalid, and that (ii) is false if God exists. I haven't the space here to convince anyone that I am right about these matters and that Plantinga is wrong. So my best strategy is simply to point out that if

Plantinga were right, then my defense of petitionary prayer would need to be modified to accommodate the fact that possibly God exists in a less than optimal world. This concession would not, however, change the basic character of my position, for the arguments I have given to show that if there is an optimal world there are many, also show that if there is a possible world of  $n$ -degree of goodness, then there are many. If Plantinga is right, and God cannot actualize an optimal world (even though there are such possible worlds), then God has to be satisfied with actualizing a less than optimal world. But there are still many worlds, all equally good, from which to choose. And in those worlds different prayers are made and answered, so that the necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer which I have been concerned to meet can still be met.

There are those who object altogether to the concept of a best possible or optimal world. Some philosophers have argued that this concept is incoherent because goodness has no inherent maximum. My first reply to this objection is that we have assumed the traditional concept of God, that is, the concept of a being who is *perfectly* good, and so forth. It seems that if there is an objection to the concept of an optimal world, then there is also an objection to the idea of a perfectly good being. Since we have assumed the latter, we are entitled to assume the former.<sup>9</sup> A second reply parallels my reply to the Plantinga-type objection; my position can readily be adjusted if there are no optimal worlds, just as long as for any world containing  $n$ -degree of goodness, there are many possible worlds containing that degree of goodness.

Another objection to my position comes from the opposite direction. If there is no unique optimal world, and for any  $n$ , no unique possible world containing  $n$ -degree of overall goodness, then the fact that God chooses to actualize a given possible world lacks a sufficient reason. This would violate any strong version of the principle of sufficient reason, i.e., any version which requires at the least that every contingent fact have an explanation. I agree with this line of reasoning, but do not find its conclusion threatening. Most theologians want to ascribe freedom of choice to God. If there is but one optimal world, and if God must create that world, then God lacks any freedom of choice, for then everything is necessary. In my view, theology is much better off allowing for contingency and for divine freedom of choice in creation, and thereby rejecting any strong version of the principle of sufficient reason.

A final criticism of my defense of petitionary prayer is that it is at best incomplete, because it doesn't explain *why* God should answer petitionary prayers, why He should choose to work His will through such prayers rather than in some other way. My first reply to this criticism is that it wasn't my purpose in this paper to provide such an explanation, but only to reply to certain charges of incoherence aimed at the idea of petitionary prayer. Nevertheless, it is an interesting question whether or not a plausible rationale for the efficacy of

petitionary prayer can be provided. Presumably, such a rationale would consist of a demonstration that the efficacy of petitionary prayer is a necessary condition for the carrying out of what is plausibly the divine plan or an aspect of the divine plan. I am sceptical about our ability to give such an explanation. Yet Eleonore Stump has attempted to do so, and now I want to argue that her attempt is unsuccessful.

Stump argues that petitionary prayer has the purpose of establishing friendship between man and God. She maintains that because men are free in the libertarian sense, God cannot simply and effectively will that this friendship obtain between man and Himself, but instead must induce men to freely choose this friendship by answering some of their prayers. Thus, Stump appears to hold that the efficacy of petitionary prayer is a necessary condition of friendship between man and God, and that it is this fact which gives the efficacy of petitionary prayer its rationale in the divine scheme.<sup>10</sup>

I believe it implausible to hold that the efficacy of prayer is necessary for friendship between man and God for the following reasons. First, it seems plausible that God could induce friendship between man and Himself by more direct means, for example, by directly communicating with individual men. Stump might reply here that such a method would necessarily be too overwhelming to establish the required friendship, but I don't see why it would have to be. God need only reveal as much of Himself in these interactions as is required to induce friendship; He need not reveal Himself in all His overwhelming majesty. There are many examples of this sort of direct communication between man and God in the Old Testament. Secondly, if an indirect method of communication such as making and answering prayers can induce friendship, then why couldn't some other indirect method achieve the same end? Finally, any role that efficacious petitionary prayer might have in inducing friendship between man and God could, given our epistemic situation, be equally well performed by the appearance of efficacy. Stump herself admits that we can't really know whether or not a prayer has been answered even if what we prayed for has come about. So we really don't know that prayer is efficacious, and as long as we believe that it is, we have the same inducement to friendship whether or not that belief is correct. Hence, if efficacious petitionary prayer is an inducement to friendship between man and God, then so is inefficacious prayer to the same extent, given that we cannot tell that it is inefficacious. Since a belief is not something we generally choose to have, God could determine that we have the belief that our prayers are efficacious, and could thereby induce the desired friendship between Himself and man. Consequently, there seems to be a third argument against the claim that efficacious prayer is necessary for friendship between man and God. To this third argument it might be rejoined that God couldn't induce friendship in this way because He could not, given His goodness,

deceive us in this way. But because human beings often acquire false beliefs through no fault of their own, i.e., when those beliefs are justified by the evidence, it must be conceded in any case that God sometimes deceives us in carrying out the divine plan. Presumably, He has good reasons for these deceptions. But if God can deceive us in these other cases, then He could deceive us, too, in causing us to believe that our prayers are efficacious.

I have argued that on the traditional conception of God, where God is understood as being perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, a necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer can be satisfied. I have argued that this is so even if God must create an optimal world. Thus, despite appearances, God's goodness does not conflict with the efficacy of petitionary prayer. I have also considered the question of whether or not we can provide a convincing reason *why* God should answer petitionary prayers, and I have said that I cannot provide such a reason. Finally, I have examined one attempt in the literature to provide such a reason and have concluded that this attempt fails.<sup>11</sup>

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

#### NOTES

1. This is obviously not a *sufficient* condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer, since it does not state or imply that when *s* is prayed for and brought about by God, it is brought about by God *because* it is prayed for.

2. "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, volume 16 (1979), pp. 81-91.

3. Strictly speaking, God does not create a possible world, but actualizes certain aspects of a possible world. Nevertheless, I will continue to use this locution with the understanding that it has the meaning intended.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

8. Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) pp. 131-55; and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) Part I.

9. I am grateful to Gary Rosenkrantz for this point.

10. *Op. cit.*

11. An earlier version of this paper was read at a meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers as part of the meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in Boston, December, 1983. The commentator for my paper was Eleonore Stump.