1-1-1985

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Erratum

article

HOFFMAN ON PETITIONARY PRAYER

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In his challenging and ingenious paper, Joshua Hoffman raises and rejects three arguments against the efficacy of petitionary prayer; in the process he takes issue with a paper of mine. I think that he is right to reject all three of the arguments against prayer which he raises, though I am not always in complete agreement with his reasons for rejecting them. But I think that the rejection of these arguments does not constitute a successful defense of petitionary prayer against the objections raised to it, particularly the objections to prayer which are the main issue in my paper; and I think that Hoffman has misunderstood the basic strategy of my solution of that issue.

The first argument Hoffman raises is Argument *A*, which Hoffman thinks is either identical or very similar to the argument against prayer which I discussed. But, in fact, I think, the two arguments are very different. Hoffman's argument, as he explains, relies on the following assumption:

> (a) There is a unique best possible world, and God necessarily creates it.

There is no such assumption in my argument. The closest thing to such an assumption in my argument are the claims in premises (1) and (4), which can be summarized as assumption (b):

> (b) If he can avoid doing so, God by bringing about a state of affairs *s* never makes the world worse than it would have been if he had not brought about *s*; and if he can do so, God by bringing about a state of affairs *s* always makes the world better than it would have been if he had not brought about *s*.

(b) is clearly not the same as (a) and is in fact compatible with the denial of (a). (b) claims that a perfectly good God must make the world he has chosen to create as good as it can be, to the extent to which he can do so; but it does not claim that God must choose to create the best possible world. Aquinas seems to me to be an example of a philosopher who accepts (b) but rejects (a).[1] Aquinas believes that God must optimally compose whatever world he chooses to create but that God cannot choose to create the best of all possible worlds because there is no single optimal set of components.

Contrary to what Hoffman supposes, then, there is no issue between him and

me over Argument *A*. But since Hoffman has brought up this argument, I think we should take a closer look at it and at his refutation of it. Hoffman begins by noting that if there is a unique best possible world and God must create it, then (given traditional theological assumptions about God's nature, such as that he necessarily exists) "there is only one possible world" (p. 2). Now Argument *A* claims that petitionary prayer is not efficacious because on these traditional theological assumptions it is true that

> (c) for any efficacious prayer *p* for a state of affairs *s*, God would have brought about *s* even if *p* had not been made.

This is the crucial claim of Argument *A*. If (c) is true, then it is apparently false that there is a possible world in which *p* is not made and *s* does not obtain. Hoffman's necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer—

> (NC) 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—

is thus not met. Therefore, petitionary prayer is inefficacious and pointless. The problem both with Argument *A* and with any attempt to evaluate it is that by contemporary conventions, (c) is in fact true but trivially true. Because Argument *A* is operating with assumption (a), that there is a unique best possible world and God necessarily creates it, Argument *A* is in effect presupposing that there is only one possible world (namely, the actual world). Consequently, the antecedent in (c) is impossible since there is no possible world in which an efficacious prayer *p* is not made; and therefore (c) is true but just in virtue of having an impossible antecedent.

The proponent of Argument *A*, it seems to me, might be forgiven for thinking at this stage that he has proved his point. Against the proponent of *A* Hoffman has basically just two things to say. First, he points out that on the presuppositions made by Argument *A* the following conditional is also trivially true in virtue of having an impossible antecedent:

> (d) "if one hadn't prayed for *s*, God *would not* have brought about *s*."

And, secondly, Hoffman makes this claim:

> (e) "It is only if the consequent of the crucial conditional [c] in *A* were to follow from its antecedent non-trivially that that conditional would pose any threat to the possible satisfaction of *NC*."

Given these two points, Hoffman feels justified in claiming that "no threat is in fact posed to the satisfaction of *NC* by argument *A*."

But consider Hoffman's two points. Why should we think claim (e) true?

Argument *A* needs claim (c) to prove its conclusion, and (c) is true, as Hoffman himself agrees. Why should the fact that (c) is true in virtue of having an impossible antecedent make any difference to the soundness of Argument *A*? As far as I can see, the reason for the truth of (c) does not alter the validity of an inference or the truth of any other premiss in Argument *A*. And unless it does so, the claim that the truth of one of the premisses is trivial is no reason at all for rejecting the conclusion of the argument. But perhaps Hoffman is inclined to believe (e) because he sees, quite rightly, that if (c) is trivially true, then (d) is trivially true; and (d) looks like the heart of Hoffman's necessary condition (*NC*) for the efficacy of prayer. So Hoffman may be thinking along these lines:

> (f) the very reasons for taking (c)—the crucial claim in the argument opposing (*NC*)—to be true are reasons for thinking (*NC*) itself true; and therefore, as long as these are the only reasons for taking (c) to be true, (c) poses no threat to (*NC*).

But (f) is demonstrably mistaken. According to (f), (d) looks like the heart of (*NC*), so that if (d) is true, (*NC*) is true. To be more precise, (d) looks like the consequent of the conditional in (*NC*); and if the consequent of the conditional is true, (*NC*) is true. The problem, however, is that although ordinarily it would be uncontroversial to claim that (d) is equivalent to the consequent of (*NC*), in this context we can show that the two are not equivalent. What makes (d) trivially true is the impossibility of its antecedent, and what makes its antecedent impossible is the theological presupposition that the actual world is the only possible world, so that there is no possible world in which a prayer *p* made in the actual world is not prayed. But the consequent of (*NC*) has as a conjunct just this claim, that there is a possible world in which *p* is not prayed. Therefore, the reasons for claiming that (d) is trivially true are reasons for maintaining that the consequent of (*NC*) is false. Hence, in this context (d) and the consequent of (*NC*) are not equivalent. And thus, as far as I can see, the truth of (d) has no bearing at all on the truth of (*NC*). As a result, the only support I can conceive of for (e) collapses; and so the fact that the crucial claim in Argument *A* is true only trivially is no reason for supposing that *A* does not prove its point.

Furthermore, this examination of Hoffman's objection to Argument *A* shows that the proponent of Argument *A* has a swift and devastating rejoinder to Hoffman's (*NC*), because he can show that on his theological views the condition (*NC*) sets forth for the efficacy of prayer cannot be met. As Hoffman presents that condition, it postulates the existence of a possible world other than the actual world. But on the theological presupposition of Argument *A*, that God necessarily creates the unique best possible world, it is necessarily false that there is a possible world other than the actual world, and thus Hoffman's condition for the efficacy of prayer can in principle never be met. So I think that the proponent

of Argument *A* not only emerges unscathed from Hoffman's attack but in fact has open to him a stronger objection to Hoffman's position than Hoffman has foreseen.

I think, however, that Hoffman himself has inadvertently been the source of much of the strength of his imaginary opponent's position, because Hoffman simultaneously analyzes all counter-factuals in terms of possible worlds and also allows his opponent assumption (a), which entails that there is only one possible world. It is for just this reason that Hoffman's (*NC*) is vulnerable to attack by the proponent of Argument *A*. If Hoffman's (*NC*) were formulated in this way:

> (*NC'*) If a prayer for a state of affairs, *s*, is efficacious, then if one hadn't prayed for *s*, God would not have brought about *s*,

that is, if Hoffman had originally formulated the consequent of (*NC*) as a counter-factual and if he had subsequently either denied assumption (a) or else allowed it but then refused to analyze counter-factuals in terms of possible worlds, his (*NC*) would be much less vulnerable to attack. In other words, because assumption (a) itself is incompatible with the truth of any affirmative existential claim about possible worlds other than the actual world, there is something odd about admitting (a) and then continuing to analyze counter-factuals in terms of possible worlds. Rather than simply allowing assumption (a) to commit us to the falsity of all counterfactuals which entail or are equivalent to affirmative existentials about non-actual possible worlds, as Hoffman does implicitly in connection with Argument *A* (and explicitly in connection with Argument *B*), it is open to us, I think, to conclude that admitting assumption (a) is incompatible with a possible-worlds analysis of counter-factuals. So perhaps the strength of the position expressed in Argument *A* (and, even more clearly, the strength of Argument *B*) depends on the inconsistency of admitting the claim that the actual world is the unique possible world and at the same time analyzing counter-factuals in terms of non-actual possible worlds.

In spite of all these disagreements with Hoffman over the appropriate criticism of Argument *A*, I agree with his general conclusion: I do not think *A* is a good argument against the efficacy of petitionary prayer. As Hoffman explains, *A* purports to show an inconsistency in Judaeo-Christian beliefs, namely, between the belief that God is essentially good and the belief that petitionary prayer is sometimes efficacious. But assumption (a), on which the argument depends crucially to derive this inconsistency, is itself incompatible with traditional Christianity. Among other reasons, traditional Christianity maintains that God has free will—he can choose to create or choose not to create, for example. But, as Hoffman recognizes, if the actual world is the only possible world, then God *can* do only what he in fact *does* do; and so, since it is not possible for him to do otherwise, he has no free will with regard to what he does. Hence, whether

or not we are inclined to agree with Hoffman's own reasons for thinking that assumption (a) is false, Christian theology is committed to denying (a); and so as an argument designed to show an inconsistency in Christian beliefs, Argument A is not successful.

I want to add, however, that although Christianity is committed to the denial of assumption (a), I think Hoffman is nonetheless wrong in concluding that the denial of this assumption is required to defend the efficacy of petitionary prayer. Even if assumption (a) were unquestionably acceptable, Argument A would not be successful, I think, because it derives its conclusion from assumption (a) by an invalid inference. From the assumption that God necessarily creates the unique best possible world and the claim that *s* is a constituent of that world, Argument A infers that God would have brought about *s* even if no one had prayed for it. But this inference is not valid. The best of all possible worlds might be a world in which *s* obtains only as a response to prayer and not otherwise, so that it is precisely that status of *s* as a response to prayer which makes *s* a constituent of the best possible world. In that case, given assumption (a) it is true that God must create a world in which *s* is prayed for and in which *s* obtains in consequence of the prayer; but it is not true and does not follow from (a) that God would have brought about *s* even if no one had prayed for it.

Argument *B*, the second argument against the efficacy of prayer which Hoffman considers, also depends crucially on the assumption that there is a unique best possible world and that God must create it, and so some of my remarks about Argument A apply to this second argument also. But the last argument Hoffman raises against the efficacy of prayer, Argument *C*, depends only on the weakened assumption that God must create an optimal world. This argument has two crucial premisses:

> (1) 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.
> (2) 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.

The reasoning behind (1) apparently goes like this. On the assumption that God must create an optimal world, God brings about *s* only in case *s* is a constituent of an optimal world. But if *s* is a constituent of an optimal world, God would have brought about *s* in any world he creates. Argument *C*, then, relies on taking (1) to imply

> (1a) *s* obtains in every optimal world (and thus in every possible world).

And given the necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer specified in (2), if *s* obtains in every possible world, there is no possible world in which *s* is not

prayed for and does not obtain. Therefore, prayer is efficacious.

Hoffman argues against this argument by attacking the implication of (1a). He apparently believes that I support this implication, and so in arguing against the implication of (1a) he takes issue with the suggestion in my paper that perhaps the fulfillment of any prayer would make the world a worse or a better place. In fact, I think that taking (1) to imply (1a) is clearly a mistake. But Hoffman's misunderstanding of my position is instructive and indicates a way to strengthen Argument *C* considerably.

My example was of a child who prays for a jackknife, and I suggested that there are reasons for thinking either that God's granting the prayer and bringing it about that this child has a jackknife would make the world a better place *or* that it would make the world a *worse* place. At issue in my discussion was *only* what difference fulfillment of the prayer would make to one particular world in which the prayer was made. And clearly even a strong argument that fulfillment of this prayer would make that world better is no reason for thinking that the state of affairs prayed for is a constituent of every optimal world. Even if God's bringing it about that this child has a jackknife is necessary to make this world optimal, it doesn't follow that God's doing so is a constituent of every optimal world unless we assume, at least, that the child in question must exist in every optimal world. And Hoffman himself in this paper argues for the falsity of such an assumption.

This gives us another reason besides the one Hoffman mentions for denying that (1) implies (1a). On Hoffman's view, there may be a world which does not include God's bringing it about that this child has a jackknife and which is yet an optimal world because the lack of this state of affairs in that world is compensated for by the presence of some equal or greater good. But another reason for rejecting the implication of (1a) is simply that what is an optimal state of affairs in one world need not be an optimal state of affairs in a different world with different components. The child's receiving a jackknife may be an optimal state of affairs in the world in which the child prays for the jackknife, but it is clearly not an optimal state of affairs in a world in which the child does not exist.

This reason for rejecting the implication of (1a) suggests a way of strengthening Argument *C*. As it stands, Argument *C* needs to claim that a successfully prayed for state of affairs *s* obtains in every possible world because it is trying to show that Hoffman's necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer (*NC*) is not met, and (*NC*) claims there is a possible world in which *s* does not obtain. Thus, Argument *C* is forced into maintaining (1a) because of the nature of the necessary condition for prayer on which *C* rests. We could make *C* much stronger, I think, by recasting it with a different necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer. What Argument *C* needs as a necessary condition, I think, is one stipulating that a prayer is efficacious only in case God brings about a prayed for state of affairs

s as a reply to the prayer for *s*, where 'as a reply to' is analyzed along the lines Alston has suggested.[2] That is, God does Y as a reply to T's prayer *p* if he is influenced to Y by T's prayer, if he does Y in light of T's prayer *p*, and if he does Y in order to respond to T's prayer *p*. In its recast form, Argument *C* claims that for T's prayer *p* for a state of affairs *s* to be efficacious, God must bring about *s* as a reply to *p*; among other things, then, God must be influenced to bring about *s* by T's prayer for *s*. To show that this necessary condition is not met, we do not have to claim that a state of affairs brought about by God in response to prayer obtains in every possible world or every optimal world. This necessary condition seems incompatible not with some modal characteristic of God's nature or of the worlds he creates but rather just with his goodness. Surely a perfectly good God could not be influenced to one or another course of action by the fact that some human being prays for it. To put it crudely, if the state of affairs prayed for is bad, a perfectly good God could not bring it about. And if the state of affairs prayed for is good, a perfectly good God will bring it about just because it is good, not because some creature has petitioned for it.

In this recast form Argument *C* is like the argument against prayer which I presented in my paper on prayer. And a successful rebuttal of *this* argument does require finding some answer to the puzzle Hoffman wants to leave to one side, namely, why a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent entity would let the prayers of human beings make a difference to his actions. That is the issue I set out to discuss in my paper on prayer, and without some resolution of this issue I do not think it is possible to give a successful defense of the practice of petitionary prayer.

As for Hoffman's attack on *my* resolution of this issue, I think he has misunderstood my position. He takes me to be arguing that God is willing to bring about goods in answer to prayer just in order to induce human beings to be friends with him. What I in fact argued is that God is willing to *not* bring about certain goods without prayer for them in order to enable himself to enter into friendships with human beings. The position Hoffman attacks takes the efficacy of petitionary prayer to be an inducement to human beings to come closer to God. On my view, the efficacy of prayer constitutes a buffer between God and man, keeping God from coming too close to his creatures. Friendship requires not only a certain sort of closeness between friends but also a certain sort of distance. By not doing everything directly himself but doing some things in response to human prayers, I argued, God grants his creatures a certain independence and thus a certain distance from himself, and this distance is necessary in order for there to be a friendship between a perfectly good, omnipotent entity and an imperfect, finite creature.

If my argument to this effect is right, then the value of friendship between

God and human beings constitutes a reason for a good God to let some of his actions be influenced by human prayers. Hence, contrary to first appearances, the necessary condition for the efficacy of prayer which forms part of the recast Argument *C* is after all met, and Argument *C* even in its recast form is refuted.

I think, then, that in his paper Hoffman has failed to take up the strongest objection against the doctrine of petitionary prayer, and that no defense of the doctrine can be really successful without making some answer to that objection. But with regard to the issues he does raise and discuss, I think there is perhaps more agreement than he supposes between my position and his.[3]

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NOTES

1. See Norman Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983) 631-649.

2. See William Alston, "Divine-Human Dialogue," in this issue.