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## Reply to Eleonore Stump

Erratum  
article

## REPLY TO ELEONORE STUMP

Joshua Hoffman

Professor Stump raises many interesting and important issues in her comments on my paper, "On Petitionary Prayer." In what follows, I shall address some of these issues.

My reason for rejecting Argument *A* was that it attacks *NC* (my necessary condition for the efficiency of petitionary prayer) in a misleading and confusing way, *viz.*, by means of a conditional ('God would have brought about *s* even if one hadn't prayed for *s*') which in the context of the argument has an impossible antecedent, but which we ordinarily read as if it had a contingent antecedent. I did not mean to say that *nothing* in *A* poses a threat to *NC*; in fact, I said that Argument *A* "perhaps 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." I then formulated Argument *B*, which attacks *NC* directly through the assumption that God must create a unique optimal world. My strategy was then to reply to Argument *B* (and, *a fortiori*, to Argument *A*) by challenging this assumption. Obviously, since Arguments *A* and *B* share this assumption, in conceding that it threatens *NC* when employed in *B*, I was conceding that it does so when employed in *A*. It was the confusing way that this assumption was used in *A* that I objected to, and not the claim that that assumption poses a threat to *NC*.

Nevertheless, in the light of Stump's comments, I now think that my remarks about Argument *A* do not clearly reflect my intended strategy, and may have misled her into thinking that I was saying of *A* that nothing in it poses a threat to *NC*. If she was misled in this way, then I am to blame, and I am grateful to her for bringing this problem to my attention.

In her discussion of Argument *A*, Stump remarks 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." I cannot agree that I *allow* my imaginary opponent (what Stump designates) assumption (a), since I spend a good deal of time refuting that very assumption. If my refutation is sound, then *both* Argument *A* and Argument *B* are disarmed, and the threat to condition *NC* is removed. Yet Stump ignores my refutation of assumption (a). Instead, she suggests that *NC* be reformulated in order to side-step the potential threat from assumption



(a). Her suggestion is that *NC* be replaced with *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*." But there are at least two difficulties with *NC'*. First, a complete semantics for counter-factual conditionals is notoriously difficult to spell out—which is why I resort instead to the terminology of possible worlds. Secondly, it is highly doubtful that *NC'* does, in fact, assert a necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer. On nearly all interpretations of counter-factual conditionals, one with an impossible antecedent is necessarily true. On assumption (a), there is a unique best possible world which God necessarily creates. Therefore, on this assumption, together with the assumption that in the best possible world *s* is prayed for, the conditional which is the consequent of *NC'* is necessarily true because its antecedent is impossible. And since its consequent is necessarily true, *NC'* is necessarily true. Hence, *NC'* is consistent with assumption (a). But, surely, the efficacy of petitionary prayer is *not* consistent with assumption (a). Thus, *NC'* does not state a necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer. Stump can object that she does not accept the interpretation of counter-factuals according to which those with impossible antecedents are necessarily true. But then she owes us an alternative account of the semantics of those counter-factuals and an explanation of why she rejects the standard reading of them. These she does not provide. In any case, I maintain that there is nothing wrong with *NC*. Stump thinks that there is something wrong with it because it is incompatible with assumption (a). But any correct necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer must be incompatible with assumption (a). It is assumption (a) which is mistaken.

Stump thinks that there is an easy way to refute Argument *A* (and *a fortiori*, Argument *B*). She points out that assumption (a) is incompatible with "traditional Christian theology," and she infers from this that "as an argument designed to show an inconsistency in Christian belief, Argument *A* is not successful." This inference is invalid, for assumption (a) might be entailed by other elements of traditional Christian theology, e.g., by traditional views of God's power, goodness, and knowledge. Hence, an argument based on assumption (a) and designed to show an inconsistency in Christian beliefs could be successful even if traditional Christian theology explicitly or implicitly denies assumption (a), just so long as other elements of traditional Christian theology entail assumption (a). A defense of the possibility of efficacious petitionary prayer requires our showing that God's goodness, power, knowledge, and necessary existence do not, despite appearances, entail the necessity of a unique optimal world.

Apparently, Stump thinks otherwise, for at one point she asserts that I am wrong to conclude that "the denial of this assumption [i.e., assumption (a)] is required to defend the efficacy of petitionary prayer." Since Stump had just argued that assumption (a) is incompatible with traditional theology, I am baffled

as to how she thinks assumption (a) can at the same time be compatible with the efficacy of petitionary prayer, when petitionary prayer is to be understood in the context of traditional theology. Moreover, assumption (a) implies the necessity of all events, something that seems to me to be obviously incompatible with the efficacy of petitionary prayer. If Stump denies the latter assertion, then she certainly owes us an argument in support of this denial. In fact, her only argument in support of her claim that assumption (a) is compatible with the efficacy of petitionary prayer is that assumption (a) does not entail that God would have brought about *s* [a prayed for state of affairs which in fact God brings about] even if no one had prayed for it. I have considered and challenged this argument above.

I turn now to Stump's comments on my discussion of Argument *C*, a third challenge to the possibility of the truth of condition *NC* which I dealt with in my paper. Argument *C* assumes that God necessarily creates an optimal world, and that in the actual world God brings about a prayed for state of affairs, *s*. It *infers* from this that (1) God would have brought about *s* even if one hadn't prayed for *s*, where this has the *implication* that (1a) God brings about *s* in every optimal world, i.e., in every possible world. My strategy is to attack this *inference*. Yet Stump thinks that I *deny* the implication from (1) to (1a), and she cites a reason which I am supposed to have given for doing so. But what she cites is a reason given by me to deny that (1) can be inferred from the assumptions that God necessarily creates an optimal world and that in the actual world God brings about a prayed for state of affairs, *s*. It is not a reason given by me to deny the implication of (1a) by (1), which implication is something I stipulate.

Stump suggests that my Argument *C* could be recast in order to create a stronger argument posing a greater threat to the efficacy of petitionary prayer. She proposes dropping my condition *NC* in favor of a different necessary condition, borrowed, she reports, from William Alston. This is the condition that "God brings about a prayed for state of affairs *s* as a reply to the prayer for *s*," where 'as a reply to' means: that God is influenced to do *s* by a person *T*'s prayer *p*, that God does *s* in light of *T*'s prayer *p*, and that God does *s* in order to respond to *T*'s prayer *p*. But as far as I can tell, this condition is not weaker, rather it is stronger, than *NC*. It seems to me, in other words, that if Stump's recast Argument *C* were a *stronger* argument against the efficacy of petitionary prayer than Argument *C*, then the necessary condition upon which the recast Argument *C* rested would be *weaker* than *NC* (assuming *NC* to be correct); at least, that condition would not entail *NC*. Yet it seems to me that Stump's necessary condition not only entails *NC*, it is not entailed by it. Therefore, it seems to me that Stump's recast Argument *C* is a weaker argument against the efficacy of petitionary prayer than my Argument *C*.

Stump describes the recast Argument *C* as "like the argument against prayer,

which I presented in my paper on prayer." Let us call the argument in Stump's paper Argument *D*. Stump believes that this argument presents a challenge to petitionary prayer by relying upon the following reasoning: "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." It is not completely clear what this argument comes to, because it is not completely clear what Stump means by a "good" or a "bad" state of affairs. One plausible interpretation of a "good" state of affairs is one which is such that when the ratio of its intrinsic goodness to evil and the ratio of the goodness to evil it causes are added together, on balance the goodness outweighs the evil. A "bad" state of affairs would be defined in a parallel fashion. Let us suppose that this is Stump's meaning. The problem raised by Argument *D* is this: how can the traditional God answer a prayer for something that is bad, or fail to bring about something good whether or not it is prayed for? And Stump's reply is that God sometimes answers prayers for bad things and sometimes fails to answer prayers for good things, because his doing so is necessary for a good which outweighs the evils permitted or the goods foregone. This good, she says, is divine/human friendship. As Stump said in her paper on prayer ("Petitionary Prayer"), (what I have called) Argument *D* is like the argument from evil: how can a perfectly good God permit evil or forego goodness? And Stump's solution of the problem parallels the free will defense by pointing to some hitherto unnoticed source of overbalancing goodness in the very process by means of which certain evils are permitted and certain goods foregone. The overbalancing goodness derives from divine/human friendship, and the process is the efficaciousness of prayer.

I have no doubt that if Stump's claims that (i) God's permitting the efficacy of petitionary prayer is necessary for divine/human friendship, and (ii) divine/human friendship is a source of goodness, were plausible and well-supported, then her attempt to solve the problem posed by Argument *D* would succeed. But there are two questions I want to raise about Stump's attempt to solve this problem. First, is her attempt successful in its own right? And secondly, is it the only possible solution to the problem? As to the first question, I argued in my paper that claim (i), at least, is *not* plausible or well-supported. Stump did not reply to my arguments to that effect, and I still think that these arguments raise serious doubts about Stump's solution. As to the second question, I believe the answer to it is also negative. My reply to Argument *C* showed that while a prayer for state of affairs *s* may be good, because the not obtaining of *s* may be equally good, God's failure to answer the prayer for *s* may not result in any net loss of goodness. In giving this reply, I did not assume that the efficacy of prayer

injected any additional element of value into the situation—I did not assume that its efficacy was “worth” anything. Yet my reply to Argument *C* is also an effective reply to Argument *D*. How can God not answer a prayer for something good? Because it may be that his not answering it results in a world that is equally good, the presence or absence of the thing prayed for being morally on a par. Hence, it seems to me that Stump is wrong when she says in her comments on my paper that I haven’t taken up (and by implication, haven’t met) “the strongest objection” being put by Argument *D*. I would maintain that my response to Argument *C* is a better reply to Stump’s Argument *D* than is her own, since it isn’t committed to what I think is the implausible contention that the efficacy of petitionary prayer is necessary for divine/human friendship.

Obviously, Professor Stump and I remain in disagreement about some of the issues surrounding the problem of the compatibility of the efficacy of petitionary prayer and divine goodness. I would like to say, though, that hers is the ground-breaking paper with respect to this problem which inspired my own modest efforts to solve the problem.

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