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PETITIONARY PRAYER: WANTING TO CHANGE THE MIND OF THE BEING WHO KNOWS BEST

Allison Krile Thornton

On the standard understanding of petitionary prayer, the purpose of prayer is to make a difference to what God will do. In this article, I argue that such an activity does not make sense.

1. Introduction

Suppose that petitionary prayer is a kind of request made of God, an attempt to make a difference to what God will do.¹ As such, it faces the challenges that trying to make a difference to what God will do faces: if God is—as traditional theism suggests—impassible and immutable and infallibly knowledgeable about the future, then making a difference to what God does seems to involve affecting the impassible, changing the immutable, or making false what someone infallibly knows to be the case.

¹Though not everyone will grant this point, of course, (see Luther, Calvin, Aquinas, Phillips), we are in good company in making such an assumption. Petitionary prayer is widely assumed to be “fundamentally a request made of God for something specific believed to be good by the one praying” (Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” 81), “[prayer] for particular things” Davison, “Petitionary Prayer” (2009), 286, and “supplicatory activity” (Flint, *Divine Providence*, 220). It is widely assumed that we make petitionary prayers “to ask God for things” (Flint, *Divine Providence*, 213) and that “[we] ask [God] to bring about some state of affairs which [we] believe may not have occurred without divine intervention” (Basinger, “Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?,” 25). The view that prayer “[makes] a difference to God [and is] at least a factor in his decision as to how he will act” is “surely the view that the vast majority of Christians, both past and present, would endorse” (Flint, *Divine Providence*, 222). In fact, “[t]he fact that our asking God to do something can make a difference to what he does underwrites the point of petitionary prayer” (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer”). One prays “in the hope that one’s request will be granted, and in the belief that some such requests, at least, are efficacious” (Hoffman, “On Petitionary Prayer,” 21). Moreover, that in prayer we try to make a difference to what God will do is an explicit assumption of those who argue that petitionary prayer can be effective, like Cohoe (“God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer”) and Parker and Kettler (“A Possible Worlds Solution”), and is at least implicit in the work of those who question the possibility that petitionary prayer gives God reasons to act, like Davison (“Petitionary Prayer” 2009), and those who defend that possibility, like Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (“The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer”) and Pruss (“Omnirationality”).



These challenges raise doubts about whether it is possible for God to answer our prayers. In this paper I raise a different problem for petitionary prayer. The problem is not that it seems God *cannot* answer petitionary prayer, but rather that it seems misguided for us to want him to.

Let me clarify. For ease of discussion, let us say that the target of a petitionary prayer is the token event (or events or range of events) prayed for and that a petitionary prayer is answered only if the target of the prayer occurs.² The target of a petitionary prayer will occur (a) in all the possible futures that satisfice (that is, are good enough for God to create, actualize, bring about, etc.) or (b) in none of the possible futures that satisfice or (c) some but not all of the possible futures that satisfice. I'll adopt a contrived vocabulary for ease of discussion by describing targets of type (a) as good, targets of type (b) as bad, and targets of type (c) as neutral, and I'll refer to possible futures simply as "futures." We may not have sufficient reason to believe of a particular target that it is good, bad, or neutral, though it will be one of the three—since "good," "bad," and "neutral" exhaust the options—and it's safe to assume that God knows which of the three it is.

With those assumptions in place, consider the following cursory argument to put the problem in relief. A petitionary prayer—as an attempt to make a difference to God—is either superfluous (in the cases in which the target of the prayer occurring is assumed to be good) or misguided (in the cases in which the target of the prayer occurring is assumed to be bad or neutral)—more on "misguided" anon.

The reason for the first disjunct is that an omnibenevolent and omnipotent person ensures that good (or at least: good enough) events occur. That is, in deciding which worlds or futures to actualize, God selects from among those that satisfice. And on the assumed definition of "good target," if a target is good, it occurs in all of God's options.

The reason for the second disjunct is that if an event is bad, it is ipso facto an event for which there is a strong, objective reason not to try to bring it about. Specifically, the reason is that the event in question is so bad that it occurs in none of the futures that minimally satisfy divine preferences. This reason is extremely strong; it is hard to imagine a reason stronger. Even if there were some intrinsic merit to the event in question or to events of its type, as long as the event fails to show up in a future good enough for God, it would be a terrible thing to come about. After all, God's preferences perfectly track all the axiological facts. Prayers for such ends, therefore, are misguided. They aim at a target that no one would want should she have both the knowledge and benevolence of God.

²The list of jointly sufficient conditions is plausibly longer than this (hence "only if" instead of "if and only if") including, for example, a condition stipulating a non-deviant connection between the prayer and God answering it, but such details are difficult to pin down (see Davison ("Petitionary Prayer" 2009, "On the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," and *Petitionary Prayer*) and irrelevant to the thesis at hand.

Further, if a state of affairs is assumed to be neutral, it is ipso facto a state of affairs for which, on the balance, there is not enough reason to try to bring about. Specifically, there is not, on the balance, enough *relevant* reason. Briefly, relevant reasons are reasons based on the targeted states of affairs. The class of relevant reasons includes reasons for and against the events requested by prayer, reasons that are related to the value of the prayed-for event. The class excludes reasons for and against praying itself, desiring itself, the trying (itself) to bring something about. Though there may well be value in praying (or desiring or trying to bring something desired about), such value is tangential to the values of the states of affairs at the target of prayers. Reasons for wanting something based on the value of wanting that something are not relevant here; relevant are reasons for wanting something based on the value of that something itself.³ Neutral states of affairs don't generate those kinds of reasons in adequate supply. They are, roughly speaking, ones that God could take or leave. Prayers for such ends, therefore, are misguided.

The general idea is that attempting to make a difference to God is like advising Bach as he composes a fugue.⁴ If your advice is good, he doesn't need it; if your advice is bad, he knows better; and if your advice is neutral, you have no reason to give it.

Here's the master argument in brief:

1. The target of every petitionary prayer is good, bad, or neutral.
2. If the target of a petitionary prayer is good, that prayer is superfluous.
3. If the target of a petitionary prayer is bad, that prayer is misguided.
4. If the target of a petitionary prayer is neutral, that prayer is misguided.
5. So, every petitionary prayer is either superfluous or misguided. [From 1–4]

Each premise needs further explication and defense. In the second through fourth sections of this paper, I'll argue for premises 2–4 in turn. But first I will register three disclaimers.

First: what this objection to petitionary prayer does not address is whether it is beneficial to make such prayers or whether, all things considered, it's something we ought to do. Even if what I press in the objection is compelling, other dimensions of petitionary prayer may make it a worthwhile activity.⁵ Arguably, petitionary prayer has many benefits. By making petitionary prayers, for example, we stand to improve morally:

³For more on this distinction, see Section 4 below.

⁴Thanks to Jesse Schupack for this metaphor.

⁵See Basinger ("Why Petition?") for a critical discussion about how authors have attempted to defend the claim that other dimensions of petitionary prayer may make it a worthwhile activity, and Smith ("Philosophical Reflection on Petitionary Prayer") and Davison ("Petitionary Prayer" 2021) for surveys of the same.

petitioning may help us recognize God as the author of our goods,⁶ learn God's will,⁷ build our communities,⁸ and strike a balance in our relationship with God between being slavish and spoiled.⁹ We also stand to expand our moral agency: effective petitioning allows us to be more responsible for our and others' actions,¹⁰ enter into partnership with God,¹¹ and extend the reach of our love.¹² I will not now engage the arguments about whether petitionary prayer in fact has these or similar benefits.¹³ Neither will I now engage the arguments about whether such benefits outweigh the apparent costs of the institution of petitionary prayer. It seems to be a cost of the institution, for example, that important goods are withheld because they were not requested. Is such a cost outweighed? The arguments for and against an affirmative answer raise pressing and interesting issues about prayer, but they are independent of the issues I raise here. Thus, I set aside the benevolence problem for petitionary prayer (aka "the problem of petitionary prayer"¹⁴), the problem of identifying good enough benefits of petitionary prayer that it seems to be no mark against God's goodness that God established the institution.

Second: another claim I will not dispute at present is whether it is possible for us to make a difference to what God does. In particular, I will not dispute that we can give God reasons or even create obligations for

⁶Aquinas *ST II*, Q83, A2. See also Murray and Meyers's ("Ask and It Will Be Given to You") and Murray's ("God Responds to Prayer") contention that petitionary prayer prevents idolatry.

⁷Meyers and Murray, "Given to You."

⁸Meyers and Murray, "Given to You."

⁹On this last point, see Stump ("Petitionary Prayer"), whose worry is that without the institution of petitionary prayer, a cooperative relationship with God—omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good—might overwhelm us—fallible, finite, and imperfect—in one of two ways: either we could become "a slavish follower who slowly loses all sense of his own tastes and desires and will" (87) or "tyrannical, willful, indolent, self-indulgent, and the like" (87).

¹⁰Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

¹¹Smith and Yip, "Partnership with God."

¹²Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," Choi, "Is Petitionary Prayer Superfluous?"

¹³But on this point, see Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer."

¹⁴So called by Basinger, "Why Petition?"; Murray and Meyers, "Given to You"; Flint, *Divine Providence*; Smith and Yip, "Partnership with God"; Smith, "Philosophical Reflections." Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," and others call the benevolence problem a problem for petitionary prayer. Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder's "puzzle of petitionary prayer" is more like what I call "the influence problem" below, but they recognize a connection between their puzzle and the benevolence problem, and they address the benevolence problem in Sections V–VII of their essay ("Puzzle"). Davison calls the benevolence problem "the divine goodness problem", but frames it as follows, also connecting it to the influence problem: "[T]here seems to be no reason to expect the God of traditional theism not to bring about some specific good just because no prayers were offered for it. But if God would have brought about the good things for which people prayed anyway, even if prayers had not been offered, then . . . God's actions do not count as answers to those prayers . . . Let us call this 'the divine goodness problem' of petitionary prayer" (Davison, "Petitionary Prayer" (2009), 292).

God by requesting things of God. Those claims have been the subject of significant controversy in discussions of petitionary prayer, but I need not address them or add to that controversy to defend my current claim.¹⁵ In fact, I will grant both that our petitionary prayers can give God reasons and that giving God reasons is a way of influencing God. Thus, I set aside the influence problem for petitionary prayer.

Third: I will not address the pair of concerns (i) that we cannot be justified in believing that any particular prayers have ever been answered, and (ii) that if we cannot be justified in believing that any particular prayers have been answered, many of the solutions to the benevolence and influence problems fail.¹⁶ The problem at issue holds whether or not we can know that prayers are answered. Thus, I set aside the epistemic problem for petitionary prayer.

Together, the three problems just mentioned—the benevolence problem, the influence problem, and the epistemic problem—almost entirely exhaust the focus of recent debates about petitionary prayer. Here I advance a new challenge: forgetting about whether praying or the institution of petitionary prayer itself adds value, assuming that our prayers do give God reasons to act, and bracketing concerns about whether we can know of any prayer that it was answered, how can it make sense for us, fallible and flawed, even to *want* to influence God, all-good and omniscient?¹⁷

¹⁵For the debate, see Flint, *Divine Providence*; Davison, “Petitionary Prayer” (2009); Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, “Puzzle”; Davison, “On the Puzzle”; Pruss, “Omnirationality”; Cohoe, “God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer”; and Parker and Rettler, “A Possible-Worlds Solution.” For the account of how requests generate moral reasons that the Howard-Snyders employ, see Cupit, “How Requests (And Promises) Create Obligations.”

¹⁶For a defense of the first claim, see Basinger, “God Does Not Necessarily Respond to Prayer,” and Davison, “Petitionary Prayer” 2021 Section 5. For a case against the first claim, see Murray (“God Responds to Prayer,” 264–265) and Pruss (“Omnirationality,” 16–20). For a debate about the second claim, see the exchange between Davison (“Petitionary Prayer” 2021 Section 6), Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (“Puzzle,” Section V), and Davison (“On the Puzzle”). Davison defends the second claim; the Howard-Snyders reject it.

¹⁷I argue that this problem is greatly underappreciated and underexplored, but to be clear, it is not entirely without precedent. The problem at stake seems to be in line with one that Davison mentions in a footnote:

Petitionary prayer sometimes gives the appearance of offering God advice about what to do, reminding God about a situation, or trying to explain to God why God should care about someone. All of these things would make sense if another human being were the object of such petitions, but God’s complete knowledge of every situation and perfect love for everyone involved make them inappropriate. So the more clearly one thinks about the nature of God, the more general one’s petitionary prayers become, and then the less clear it is whether or not one’s prayers make a difference. I call this “the puzzle of particularity.” (“Petitionary Prayer” 2009, 301)

It also has some similarities with Martin Pickup’s exploration of “the problem of petitionary prayer” in “Answer to Our Prayers,” 84–104.

2. *If the target of a petitionary prayer is good, that prayer is superfluous*

Suppose that the target of your petitionary prayer is good. That is (given the operative definition of “good”), suppose that it occurs in all of the futures that satisfy. Since God will choose which future to bring about from among the futures that satisfy, God needs no further reason—such as the fact that you petition—to select one in which the target occurs. God has enough reason regardless. In this case, therefore, your prayer is superfluous.

The following example illustrates my point. Suppose you broke your arm. You would like to recover fully, but before you attempt to bring it about, you might ask yourself, “What would *God* like for me?” knowing that what God wants for you is a function of both God’s omniscience and love for you and consequently is truly what is best for you. After all, God knows what your preferences are, what your weaknesses and strengths are, what you need to flourish, etc., and God has perfect love for you. There is no truer guide to what is good for you than God’s preferences with respect to you. Thus, your preference for recovery should be provisional, contingent on whatever God’s preferences are. Moreover, God knows and loves not only you, but everyone else as well. God knows the most just and loving balance of people getting what they want and not getting what they want. God knows the price of each good and which prices are worth paying. Your preference for recovery should be contingent on God’s preferences about these more global facts, too. To the extent that you can, you ought to align your preferences with God’s, even when they fail to favor you in particular.

But if every future that satisfies God’s preferences includes your recovery, then your initial preference for recovery stands. In that case, however, it doesn’t make sense to request to recover. At least, the request would be superfluous. All the futures that God will choose from include your recovery. As Eleonore Stump put a similar objection to some petitionary prayers, “Why ask for something that is certain to come whether you beg for it or flee from it?”¹⁸

It might be objected that it’s possible that all of the satisficing futures include not only the target but also your prayer for it. In other words, there may be some value in the asking itself. In case that is the case, the objection goes, we ought to pray, because God’s preferences include that we pray. I grant the normative claim, but I deny that prayer in such a case is properly petitionary or petitionary in the request-making sense we supposed at the outset.

Here’s why. Generally, when we make requests, what we aim to do is give the requestee a reason to do what was requested and the sort of prayer under review is the sort aimed at giving God reasons to do what was requested. Arguably, it is the sort of prayer that we cannot make while

¹⁸Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” 83.

thinking that it won't make any difference to whether God does what we request. As Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder argue, "in general, our words do not constitute the speech act of petitioning if we think that our words won't make any difference to whether the petitioned does what we ask."¹⁹ Even if, following Davison, "[The] Howard-Snyders' position on this issue seems too restrictive—since one could offer a petitionary prayer to God while on the fence about God's existence—it seems that the petitioner, to really be petitioning, has got to think her prayer *might* make a difference."²⁰

In light of this, under the objection's assumption that the satisficing futures include a prayer's target, a prayer cannot be properly petitionary because, assuming we are reasonable and paying attention, we will think of that prayer that it will not make a difference to whether God does what we ask. *Ex hypothesi*, God is going to do it. The prayer might seem petitionary, or have the same verbal shape as a petition, but it would not in fact be or constitute a petition. So even if all the satisficing futures include you asking for something, your asking cannot constitute a petition as long as you assume that the target of your prayer is good.

Of course, we are not often in a position to assume that the target of a prayer is good in the stipulated sense.²¹ Couldn't a prayer for an end that is good but not known to be so by us constitute a petition?²² Moreover, the above account of petitioning may be flawed anyway: perhaps it is possible to make a petition without thinking that it might make a difference to whether the petitioned does what we ask. But even granting these points, because such prayers are in fact not difference-making (their targets showing up in every satisficing future), they are not the sort of prayer that has preoccupied the contemporary conversation on the topic, focused as that conversation is on the benevolence, influence, and epistemic problems. For example, consider that most parties to the debate on petitionary prayer agree that at least almost all of the time, the hope we have in making petitionary prayers is that they are efficacious, that they at least "factor in [God's] decision as to how he will act."²³ That our prayers can make a difference to what God does "underwrites the point of petitionary prayer."²⁴ This is why the influence problem is at the center of the debate. To solve the problem, it is argued that our prayers can influence God by

¹⁹Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, "Puzzle," 46.

²⁰Davison, *Petitionary Prayer*, 9.

²¹Though I will note that my point seems to follow even if we merely *pretend*, rather than assume, that the target is good. And if what I say about bad and neutral targets stands, we won't get any mileage out of the thought that the target might be something other than good.

²²Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

²³Flint, *Divine Providence*, 222.

²⁴Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder ("Puzzle," 43). See also everyone cited in the first footnote of this paper.

making a difference for what the best thing for God to do is.²⁵ Here's an example of how it's meant to work. Suppose you want it to rain. And suppose that without any prayers for rain, God has just as much reason to make it rain as not to. Now suppose you pray for rain. In doing so, it seems, you give God one more reason to make it rain (or so this solution to the influence problem goes; let's grant it). Your prayer has changed what is best for God to do. And this seems to be a power of petitionary prayers generally—they alter the landscape of divine preferences.²⁶

On this understanding of petitionary prayer, the point of petitioning is to do something such that, having done it, it's better for the petition's target to occur than not. But if the target of a prayer is good—that is, if the satisficing futures already include the target of that prayer—the prayer fails to be a difference-making exercise in the sense just described. Those prayers do not shape the landscape of divine preferences with respect to their targets. Does that render all such prayers unimportant? Of course not; especially not under the assumption that every satisficing world includes such prayers. But is it incorrect to think of such prayers that they make a difference to God? Yes. And that makes those prayers—namely, the ones that do not alter the landscape of divine preferences regarding their targets—not the prayers that have been at the focus of the recent debate on petitionary prayer.

It might be thought that we pray to avoid the satisficing futures in which the target doesn't occur in case there are any such futures. But as I'll discuss in the following two sections, if there are satisficing futures in which the target of your prayer does not occur, it is misguided to want the target to occur.

3. If the target of a petitionary prayer is bad, that prayer is misguided

Suppose that the target of your petitionary prayer is bad. That is, suppose it occurs in none of the futures that are good enough for God to create. In that case, you should not want the target of your prayer to occur, or at least you should not want it enough to pursue it. You may still want the outcome to some degree, but upon assuming that it occurs in no futures that are good enough for God—who loves you and is omniscient—to create, you should acquire an overriding desire for the target not to occur. Thus, to the extent that it is misguided to try to bring about something supposed to be bad, it is misguided to pray for something supposed to be bad. Futures in which such a target occurs are futures you would do

²⁵See especially Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, "Puzzle," Sections II-III, and Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer."

²⁶In this way, prayers are like ordinary requests between ordinary people: "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," Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer."

well to avoid, much less convince God to bring about. You don't—or you shouldn't anyway—want to do that.

Even if you really, really want to recover from some injury, you should maintain that if God did not approve of any of the possibilities in which you were healed, then it would be better *not* to recover. Perhaps God prefers that you not recover from your injury because if you were to recover, you would not be in a position to depend on your family, with whom, by depending on them instead of recovering, you end long-standing rifts and develop deep friendships. And perhaps without that, you would live out your life so miserably that such a future would not satisfy. Perhaps not. But what we can be confident in is that if God prefers that you not recover, it is for the better. In that case, it does not make sense to try to bring about a future in which you do recover.

The point holds even if a pray-er does not know of a target whether it is bad or if she has reason to believe that the target is good. A target may, for instance, have great intrinsic value that is easy to spot, but outweighing instrumental disvalue that only God appreciates.²⁷ Prayers for such ends are off track.

Moreover, though a pray-er may not know of a target whether it's good, bad, or neutral, it's got to be one of those, and whichever it is—I turn now to the last step—something is wrong.

4. If the target of a petitionary prayer is neutral, that prayer is misguided

Possibly the target of your prayer occurs in some but not all of the futures that satisfy. For example, if the target of your prayer is that you recover, it may be that there are some good enough futures in which you do recover and some good enough futures in which you don't. My contention is that in such a case, you have no good reason to try to change God's mind about which of those futures to create or actualize. That is, you have no good reason to try to get God to prefer a future in which the target occurs to the futures in which it doesn't. In fact, you have good reason not to try.

There are a few ways that the target of your prayer can be neutral in the sense I've stipulated above. First, God could prefer futures in which the target does not occur to futures in which it does occur, even though both target-occurs futures and target-does-not-occur futures satisfy. For

²⁷This distinction—between a target's intrinsic value and it's all things considered value—underscores an important difference between our preferences and God's: while our preferences might be based on our beliefs about a target's intrinsic value, God's are also informed by (true) beliefs about the target's instrumental value, beliefs we are not always in a position to have. The distinction also points to a reason we might have for praying (although it is not a "relevant" reason in the sense I use here), namely being "symbolically for the good." In *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything*, Scott Davison argues that we can be symbolically for the good even when we can't create it. In the event that the target of a prayer is intrinsically valuable, we might pray as a way of being symbolically for the good, even if we don't know what is best, all things considered. Thanks to Scott Davison for sharing this insight in personal correspondence.

example, God could prefer futures in which you do not recover to futures in which you do, even though futures of both sorts satisfy. In that case, you should not pray for the target; the non-target futures are objectively preferable.

The second way the target of your prayer could be neutral is that God could have no preference between the satisficing futures in which the target occurs and futures in which it does not occur. For example, God could be indifferent with respect to your recovery. In that case, and in the interest of aligning your preferences with those of the supremely rational and loving being, you should acquire overriding neutrality towards the target.²⁸ But this comes at the cost of having a reason to pursue the target. You might think that desire for your recovery, for instance, serves as a tiebreaker when God's attitude towards your recovery is neutral. But God's neutrality towards the target occurring has already factored in your particular desires and default preferences and the value to fulfilling them. But as we are assuming, even then it is objectively no better for you to recover than not to recover. When outcomes are equally good like that, the rational thing to do when choosing between them is to choose at random. But if we assume that even God would choose at random, what good reason do *you* have to try to bring about one outcome over the other?

More specifically: what relevant reasons do you have? Those are the ones we are interested in. You may have other reasons to pray, such as its being calming or believing that God told you to. But those reasons are tangential to the value of the target occurring. They do not affirm that the target has some degree of intrinsic value or that there is any sense in the prayer considered as petition.²⁹

²⁸Why should my preferences align in this way? It may seem that they need not, maybe because my perspective is different from God's, or because there are reasons I have that are relative to me that make sense of my particular preferences, or because I have special obligations that justify some degree of partiality. But while I grant that we do not share God's perspective, admit the possibility that there are agent-relative reasons for action, and want to leave room for the permissibility of partiality (although I think there is a debate to be had in a Christian moral theory about partiality's place), I think that God's reasons ultimately trump my own. God's preferences have already factored in my perspective and taken into account my own concerns, prior preferences, relative reasons, unique obligations, and every special thing about me. They do not do a worse job tracking value than mine do, and since God is wiser and better than I am, they plausibly track value better. This is not to deny some sense in which my incompletely informed preferences can be "reasonable," just as there is some sense in which it can be reasonable to hold a false belief (namely, a belief for which you have sufficient reason but which is nevertheless false.) But it is a rejection of the idea that our preferences and God's preferences are ultimately on par.

²⁹The distinction here corresponds roughly to the distinction between "right kinds of reasons" and "wrong kinds of reasons" in the "wrong kinds of reasons problem" debate for Scanlon's buck-passing account of value. The distinction is difficult to characterize, especially for reasons for actions (see Gertken and Kiesewetter, "The Right and Wrong Kind of Reasons," for a summary). But comparison to a paradigm case is illuminating: consider Kavka's famous toxin puzzle, in which a billionaire offers you a substantial reward for forming an intention to drink a poison that will make you painfully (but not life-threateningly) ill.

It might be objected that “our asking others to do something can change the moral status of their doing it.”³⁰ In other words, it might be objected that we have a solution to the influence problem, and so we can assume our prayers can alter which futures are preferable. For example, writes Cohoe:

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.³¹

The idea is that even if right now at t_0 it is not preferable that you recover, you can say a prayer at t_1 such that at t_2 it is preferable that you recover. So, if you want to do things to bring about your recovery, pray, making it better for you to recover than not. That way God will help you out.

But this objection presumes a verdict on precisely what is under dispute: namely whether, given certain facts about what is objectively preferable, we should *want* to bring about a certain target. The question is not whether doing so is possible. The question is whether doing so is a good idea. Precisely what I maintain is that in some circumstances, we don't have enough reason to try to bring about a certain target, including by means of altering divine preferences. These are the circumstances at issue: circumstances in which when God surveys all of the satisficing futures compatible with how things have gone up to t_0 , and God has no preference between the futures in which the target occurs and futures in which it does not occur. Included in God's survey are the futures in which you pray at t_1 and the futures in which you do not pray at t_1 . Even so, we are

In the puzzle, you certainly have reason to drink the toxin, but the wrong kind of reason is at play. Following Schroeder, “Ubiquity,” the reason you have in the puzzle is remarkable in the following ways: it is more difficult to intend to drink the toxin on the grounds that you'll be rewarded for the intention than on the grounds that you'll be rewarded for the action; the reason doesn't affect the rationality of the intention; and the reason has the same “flavor” as pragmatic—as opposed to epistemic—reasons for belief. Something similar goes for reasons for prayer that aren't relevant (in the sense of “relevant” employed here). It is more difficult to pray because God told you to, for example, than it is to pray out of an interest in the target of your prayer or because you see some intrinsic value in it; praying because it's calming to you, for example, has no bearing on appropriateness of the target of your prayer; and such reasons have the same “flavor” as pragmatic—as opposed to epistemic—reasons for belief.

³⁰Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, “Puzzle,” 47.

³¹Cohoe, “God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer,” 34.

currently stipulating, the target is neutral. Even if, given that you pray at t_1 , a future (relative to t_1) in which your prayer is answered is preferable to one in which it is not, it does not follow that futures (relative to t_0) in which you pray at t_1 are preferable to ones in which you don't pray at t_1 . In other words, it doesn't follow that it's preferable to do something such that it becomes objectively better for the target of your prayer to occur. The question to ask at t_0 is this: what reason do I have to try to bring about this target? Assuming that it is objectively no better for the target to occur than not, the answer is: no (relevant) reason. And—unless there is some value in changing divine preferences—"no reason" is the right answer even if prayer *can* change the moral status of the prayer's target occurring.

It might be objected that even if there is no objective reason for a certain outcome from a God's-eye perspective, one might have a personal preference for that outcome. Perhaps, for example, God has no preference as to whether this or that person gets a particular job because both have equally good outcomes overall. Nevertheless, each candidate might prefer that she herself gets the job, even though she may acknowledge that if the other gets it, things might be just as good overall. I grant that someone may have such a preference and that it may motivate them to try to bring about the future they prefer, but I deny that it is a good reason. If God thinks it's no better for this or that person to get a job, then that's the truth. And if that's the truth, then there's something untoward about thinking otherwise or maintaining a preference out of step with that reality.³²

What if the futures in which you pray and your prayer is answered *are* better than all of the alternatives: futures in which you pray and the target of your prayer does not occur, futures in which you don't pray but the target in question does occur, and futures in which you don't pray and the target in question does not occur? The question is especially pressing if all of those options satisfice, that is if God will allow any number of alternatives to his top choice depending on our behavior. To make the point concrete, consider the scene in the Acts of the Apostles in which Peter publicly tells a man lame from birth to stand up and walk (an event which Flint describes as an implicit petitionary prayer on Peter's part).³³ Although there would plausibly be some value in the man healing spontaneously (or, let's assume, in not healing at all), his healing *in combination with* Peter's prayer might be God's top choice because, unlike a spontaneous healing (or no healing at all), healing in response to prayer has important positive consequences for the early church. In these sorts of cases, it seems that God "leaves it up to us" which of a wide range of satisficing outcomes will be actualized, conferring on us "significant additional free

³²It is untoward in roughly the way that partiality is inappropriate (if it is) or that there is something wrong about false—but reasonable—beliefs. See footnote 26 for a further discussion of this point.

³³Flint, *Divine Providence*, 223.

agency" (as Swinburne argues.)³⁴ God is open, so to speak, to various possibilities, but our prayers are required to unlock the best. What—in these cases—should we do?

I think in such cases you should pray. At any rate, such prayers would not be superfluous, nor, being a part of God's favorite futures, would they be unwarranted. But take note: if a petitionary prayer makes sense only under the assumption that the preferred futures include that prayer, then that prayer is difference-making only in a limited sense. When you pray under that assumption, your prayer is not primarily an exercise in making some futures better than others, but rather is a response to the facts about what futures are better (specifically, it's a response to the fact that the futures that include your prayer are better than all of the alternatives). Prayers like these do not primarily—or at least, do not merely—change the landscape of divine preferences in order to make it more likely for their target to occur. They respond to the landscape of divine preferences as it already is. Thus, although their expression may permit outcomes that would not have otherwise happened, they are unlike petitions as we ordinarily think of them, functioning more like passwords than appeals.

Moreover, in these cases, it is not merely the value of the target that makes the relevant target-futures preferable; it is also the value of praying (or the value of the combination of the prayer and the target occurring.) Admittedly, that doesn't mean it's incoherent to pray in these circumstances or that such prayers could not make a difference to what happens. But it means that prayer in these circumstances is not how we usually think of it, and if these are the only conditions under which petitionary prayers make sense, the institution is quite a bit different than we typically take it to be. As Martin Pickup argues in connection to a similar concern about Cohoe's view (considered above), if this is how petitionary prayer works, then "the objective point of petitionary prayer . . . is simply to gain the benefits of effective petitionary prayer" as opposed to bringing about desired or thought-to-be-valuable targets. Pickup observes: "If asked, this is not what petitioners would think about their prayer. They do not, explicitly or implicitly, take themselves to be asking for some outcome which is antecedently not better to occur than not."³⁵

It also suggests that without any reason to believe that petitionary prayer is a part of futures God prefers, it wouldn't make much sense to pray. In other words, it suggests that without either a convincing answer to the benevolence problem or a clear command to pray, it doesn't make much sense to pray. There are, of course, extensive attempts to answer the benevolence problem and clear commands from within some traditions to pray in a petitionary way. My point is to emphasize the importance of those attempts and commands. Independently of them, petitioning doesn't seem like a good idea.

³⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee for pursuing this point.

³⁵Pickup, "Answer to Our Prayers," 93–94.

And we may well wonder whether divine commands to pray can do all the work we seem to need them for anyway. As Stump points out when discussing prayers for events that are certain to come:

It is no answer to [questions about whether it makes sense to pray] to say, as some theologians have done, that one prays in this way just because Jesus prescribed such a prayer. That attempt at an answer simply transfers responsibility for the futile action from the one praying to the one being prayed to; it says nothing about what sense there is in the prayer itself.³⁶

Similarly, maintaining that we pray in certain circumstances because we have a command to pray or because God wants us to just transfers responsibility for the unmotivated action from the one praying to the one being prayed to. It says nothing about what sense there is in the prayer itself. So, commands to pray seem unpromising as a way to make sense of the petitionary aspect of petitionary prayer.

The final way the target of your prayer could be neutral is that God could prefer futures in which the target does occur to futures in which it does not occur, even though both target-occurs futures and target-does-not occur futures satisfy. In this case, unlike in the first two, it is reasonable to maintain your attitude of preference towards certain futures (ones in which, for example, you recover from your injuries), but nevertheless, it doesn't make sense to try to influence by request which kind of future God brings about. Either God will choose a target-occurs future anyway or (only if God is capable of choosing a future to which God prefers an alternative—a significantly contentious assumption) God will choose another future, a future that is good enough for God. And if a future is good enough for God, it should be good enough for you. Recall the earlier comparison between God and Bach: you may have a suggestion for Bach that is fine, but Bach doesn't need your neutral advice. Nor do you have adequate reason to give it. Bach has good taste and his skill is unmatched. A fugue good enough for Bach is good enough for you.

Given that God is omniscient and loves you perfectly, there seems to be insufficient reason to try to influence God with respect to what futures to actualize. In fact, the fact that you aren't omniscient and perfectly loving may be a reason not to try to influence God.

5. Conclusion

My conclusion is not that we should never pray; my argument does not support so strong a claim. Rather, I conclude that either our prayers are superfluous or we should not, when we think about it, really want God to answer them—at least, not without also counting on the value of something other than the target of your prayer, namely your praying itself. I disagree with Stump that “it is hard to imagine anyone putting himself

³⁶Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” 88.

in [a relation of sharing thoughts and feelings and the like] to a person he believes to be omnipotent and good without also *asking* for whatever help he needs."³⁷ I actually find it quite easy to imagine being in that situation. All I have to do is also imagine remembering that the person I have a relation to knows far better than I do what the better thing to do is.

What does all of this suggest? Is it that the attitude to take when sharing our desires with God is unwavering deference to God's preferences? Perhaps; any form of genuine requesting seems superfluous or misguided. But this renders petitionary prayer senseless—insofar as it is a request, anyway, which is how almost everyone thinks of it—on its own. The options, then, are to reject my arguments for the superfluity or misguidedness of prayer or to deny that petitionary prayer is properly a request.³⁸

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³⁷Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 88.

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