



ATHEISTIC PRAYER

Shieva Kleinschmidt

In this paper I will argue, contrary to common assumptions, that rational atheistic prayer is possible. I will formulate and respond to two powerful arguments against the possibility of atheistic prayer: first, an argument that the act of prayer involves an intention to communicate to God, precluding disbelief in God's existence; second, an argument claiming that reaching out to God through prayer requires believing God *might* exist, precluding rational disbelief in God. In showing options for response to these arguments, I will describe a model on which atheistic prayer is not only possible, but is on a par with theistic prayer in many more ways than one might expect.

A young man is in a car accident, and spends a month in a coma. The MRIs do not give reason to hope. Eventually he recovers, but for that first month his family members are unsure whether he will wake. Over several weeks, his sister prays for him. She prays for God to watch over him and their family, to mend his brain, and to bring him back to consciousness. There is one catch: she is an atheist.

It is often accepted that atheists cannot pray.¹ We hear of “foxhole conversions” all the time: atheists in dire circumstances who pray to God and, since it is assumed that atheists cannot pray to God, thereby indicate that they have become theists (or were theists all along). From the other side, it is not uncommon for atheists to become annoyed at or puzzled by requests for prayer from theists; the assumption of the recipients of such requests seems to be that, since atheistic prayer is impossible, the request amounts to pressure to convert to theism.

In what follows, I will not only argue against the widespread assumption that atheists cannot pray, I will argue that atheistic prayer is on a par with theistic prayer in many more ways than one might expect. Following some stage-setting in §1 addressing the question of what it is to pray to God, in §2 I will present evidence that there is a widespread assumption that atheists cannot pray to God in the way theists do. I will show how the arguments behind two common sentiments (one often endorsed by

¹I will be using “atheist” to mean simply *someone who believes God does not exist*. (This is in contrast with “practical atheism,” which does not require disbelief in God but does require a subject’s acting as if they disbelieve in God.) I am happy for readers to take “God” to mean whatever they’d like (reading it as a name, a definite description for something omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etc., or a description of a different sort of entity altogether).



theists, one often endorsed by atheists) depend on the assumption that atheists cannot pray to God. I will also show that atheistic “prayer,” when it is discussed, is typically treated as merely a kind of mimicry of theistic prayer. In §3 I will formulate what I take people to have in mind when they say atheistic prayer to God is incoherent: according to the Metaphysical Incoherence Objection, atheistic prayer is either conceptually incoherent or a subject’s praying to God entails something metaphysically incompatible with their endorsing atheism. In §3.2, in response to the Metaphysical Incoherence Objection, I will present a picture of atheistic prayer presented by John Lemos and Tim Mawson, and based on a model of agnostic prayer presented by Anthony Kenny.² In §3.3 I will show that this sort of model can be expanded to show a variety of ways in which atheistic prayer is on a par with theistic prayer, including allowing for communication with God and development of a relationship with God. In §4 I will present a second objection to atheistic prayer to God, and to the model presented in §3.2. According to the Epistemic Incoherence Objection, atheistic prayer involves an either epistemically or metaphysically unacceptable combination of doxastic states. In §4.1 I present one way of arguing for this, by claiming that even if our model of atheistic prayer is roughly correct, in order to pray a subject must believe that God *might* exist. And a subject either cannot or should not believe that God might exist while also believing that God does not exist. In §4.2 I will discuss several options for response to this instance of the Epistemic Incoherence Objection, falling into two categories: (i) objections to the general worries raised for the compatibility of statements or propositions of the form *might(p)* and $\neg p$, and (ii) objections to the application of these worries to the topic of atheistic prayer to God. I will conclude that there are many ways to maintain the coherence of atheistic prayer to God, and such prayer may be more similar to theistic prayer than we imagined: if God exists, atheistic prayer may allow atheists to communicate with God and form a lasting and evolving relationship with Him, all while believing that God does not exist.³

1. What Does It Mean to Pray?

Before we ask about whether atheists can pray to God, we should examine what it means for anyone to pray to God. The word “prayer” may mean quite different things in different contexts, and has been taken to mean different things over time. For instance, early Christian authors,⁴

²Lemos, “An Agnostic Defence of Obligatory Prayer”; Mawson, “Praying to Stop Being an Atheist”; Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*.

³Of course, I will not argue that atheistic prayer is on a par with theistic prayer in all respects. Some important features of a relationship do depend on actually believing the other entity exists. But where a theist may trust God, or fear God, an atheist may conditionally do so (though I do not wish to take a stand on which way we ought to cash that out).

⁴For discussion of this, see Tugwell, “Prayer, Humpty Dumpty, and Thomas Aquinas,” and Dupuy, “Oraison” (the latter is discussed in relation to Aquinas in Davies, “Prayer”).

including Thomas Aquinas, endorsed the following (noting that Aquinas took prayers of thanksgiving to be petitions for God's attention⁵):

"prayer to God" =_{df} a petition directed toward God.

On this reading of "prayer," prayers should have a particular purpose: to ask God for things (and, if Aquinas is right, sometimes to ask God for His attention in order to thank Him). Expressions of penitence and praise, if they do not involve petitions, will not count as prayers. For some, this may be a welcome result. Hugh of Saint Victor discussed this view in his *De virtute orandi*; Tugwell comments "that some people were evidently quite disturbed by the fact that when we pray . . . we say a lot of things to God in which we do not ask for anything: it is a mockery rather than prayer to come before God as if to ask for something and then suddenly turn aside to other things which are quite irrelevant."⁶ However, contemporary views are far more permissive. We tend to think that one can pray by, for instance, kneeling by a bedside telling God about your day at work, or about your happy anticipation of tomorrow's lunch with your mother. If we wish to allow non-petitionary, communicative acts directed at God to count as prayer, we may offer a less restricted account of prayer to God:

"prayer to God" =_{df} a communicative act directed toward God.

This allows that, when directed toward God, official prayers in church, petitions and expressions of gratitude, and informal chatter all count as prayers to God.

⁵In the *Summa Theologica* II-II.Q.83.A17, Aquinas says

Three conditions are requisite for prayer. First, that the person who prays should approach God Whom he prays: this is signified in the word "prayer," because prayer is "the raising up of one's mind to God." The second is that there should be a petition, and this is signified in the word "intercession." On this case sometimes one asks for something definite, and then some say it is "intercession" properly so called, or we may ask for some thing indefinitely, for instance to be helped by God, or we may simply indicate a fact, as in John 11:3, "Behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick," and then they call it "insinuation." The third condition is the reason for impetrating what we ask for: and this either on the part of God, or on the part of the person who asks. The reason of impetration on the part of God is His sanctity, on account of which we ask to be heard, according to Daniel 9:17-18, "For Thy own sake, incline, O God, Thy ear"; and to this pertains "supplication" which means a pleading through sacred things, as when we say, "Through Thy nativity, deliver us, O Lord." The reason for impetration on the part of the person who asks is "thanksgiving"; since "through giving thanks for benefits received we merit to receive yet greater benefits."

One way of reading this is as claiming that there are three conditions on prayer: that it's directed toward God, involves a petition, and is motivated by the right kind of reason (or maybe, a reason is given). Thanksgiving is counted as a petition for God's attention, motivated by our interest in being deserving of additional goods. Idle chatter aimed at God may not count as prayer on Aquinas's account, because though it involves a petition for God's attention, it may not be motivated by the right sorts of reasons (or include expression of those reasons).

⁶Tugwell, "Prayer, Humpty Dumpty, and Thomas Aquinas," 24, discussing *De virtute orandi*, PL 176, 981-982.

A puzzle arises for this account of *prayer to God*, however. Suppose you were among the disciples at the Last Supper. You're sitting near Jesus and you ask Him to pass the bread, as you might ask your sibling to. Or you're at the market and bump into Him and, without realizing who it is, say "Oh! Excuse me!" Even if we think that Jesus is God, intuitively these do not count as instances of prayer. However it does seem that, in principle, one could sit next to Jesus and pray to him, "Lord, please give me bread," or in the market offer up the prayer "Please excuse my trespass." If we do want to separate these acts, how might our account do so?

One might claim that in the cases where one talks to God without praying to Him, communicative acts are being directed toward God, but not at God *qua* divine entity. We may modify our account slightly:

"prayer to God" =_{df} a communicative act directed toward God *qua* divine entity.

There are multiple objections one may raise to this account,⁷ and I take the question of what prayer is to be far from settled. But for our purposes, it is enough to note that it seems likely that any account we end up with will include the necessary condition that a communicative act is directed toward God.

There are, of course, some accounts of prayer that do not include this necessary condition. Tugwell and Davies note that St. Bonaventure takes prayer, in its broadest sense, to mean "every good deed."⁸ St. Augustine endorsed a similarly broad account of prayer, noting that it helps us in making sense of the instruction to pray without ceasing: "For it is your heart's desire that is your prayer; and if your desire continues uninterrupted, your prayer continues also. For not without a meaning did the Apostle⁹ say, 'Pray without ceasing.'"¹⁰ Though these senses of "prayer" are important, they are more broad than the sense I will be concerned with in relation to atheism.

⁷For instance: suppose you're at the Last Supper and you ask the Son to pass the bread, but you are also well aware of the Son's divinity, and you're pretty nervous as you ask Him. You're not asking Him to pass the bread in any particularly divine way, but you are definitely thinking of Him *qua* divine entity as you ask. Is this enough to make your request a prayer, while an otherwise indistinguishable request made by someone less aware would not count as a prayer?

And a second worry: if we think we can also pray to non-divine entities such as angels and saints, we need to modify our account of prayer to God to produce something that is more easily generalizable. For instance, we may appeal to the property of *holiness*, producing the following general account of prayer (perhaps with additional restrictions, to preclude praying to things like holy locations):

"prayer" =_{df} a communicative act directed toward holy entities *qua* holy entities.

⁸Davies, "Prayer," 467.

⁹1 Thessalonians 5:17.

¹⁰Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 38*, 13. He goes on, "Are we to be 'without ceasing' bending the knee, prostrating the body, or lifting up our hands . . . ? Or if it is in this sense that we say that we 'pray,' this, I believe, we cannot do 'without ceasing.' There is another inward kind of prayer without ceasing, which is the desire of the heart. Whatever else you are doing, if you do but long for that Sabbath, you do not cease to pray."

My arguments will apply to prayer to God understood as communicative acts directed at God, and I will remain neutral on whether there are additional restrictions on the kinds of communicative acts involved (as Aquinas thought), and on whether the prayers must be directed at God *qua* divine (or holy, etc.) entity. In what follows, “prayer to God” may be read as meaning *a communicative act directed toward God*.

2. Atheistic Prayer’s Assumed Impossibility

It is often assumed that atheists cannot pray to God (that is, pray in a way that is directed at God, even if God exists). There are two sorts of evidence for this: first, there are popular arguments given that seem to assume that atheistic prayer to God is impossible. Second, when discussions do allow for atheistic prayer, it is often not taken to be prayer to God, or prayer anything like theistic prayer except in appearance.

2.1. Arguments Assuming the Impossibility of Atheistic Prayer to God

Arguments assuming the impossibility of atheistic prayer have been given by atheists and by theists. For instance, consider discussion of “foxhole conversions”: when an atheist is put into dire circumstances, that person often ends up praying to God and (it is often concluded) thereby shows that he/she has converted to theism (or was never *really* an atheist). For instance, consider this statement by Dwight Eisenhower:

As a former soldier, I am delighted that our veterans are sponsoring a movement to increase our awareness of God in our daily lives. In battle, they learned a great truth—that there are no atheists in the foxholes. They know that in time of test and trial, we instinctively turn to God for new courage. . . . Whatever our individual church, whatever our personal creed, our common faith in God is a common bond among us.¹¹

These sorts of descriptions of foxhole conversions seem to suggest an argument along the following lines:

Foxhole Conversions Against Atheistic Prayer

1. Often, when an atheist is in dire circumstances, that person begins to pray to God.
2. Atheists cannot pray to God.
3. So, any time an atheist begins to pray to God, this involves that person converting to theism.

One may give an even stronger version of this argument, against atheism altogether:

¹¹Dwight D. Eisenhower, February 7, 1954 (broadcast from the White House as part of the American Legion “Back To God” Program).

Foxhole Prayers Against Atheists

1. Often, those who think they are atheists have the disposition that, if they were in dire circumstances, they would begin to pray to God.
2. Atheists cannot have the disposition that, if they were in dire circumstances, they would begin to pray to God.
3. So, often, those who think they are atheists are not atheists.

In support of premise (2) of this argument against atheists, the proponent may say: "Atheists cannot pray to God. And in cases of immediate prayers to God in response to dire circumstances, the subject often doesn't have a change in their beliefs: they do not gain new evidence that God exists, they do not reconsider their earlier determination that God doesn't exist. They simply immediately reach out to God, exercising an inclination to act that was there all along. Thus, the elements of prayer to God that preclude atheism were present in the subject all along." So, both of the Foxhole arguments depend on the claim that atheists cannot pray to God.

It is not only theists who often say that atheistic prayer to God is impossible. Atheists also often seem inclined to endorse the view that atheists cannot pray to God. Atheists sometimes express confusion or annoyance when theists ask for their prayers, or when theists communicate that they have prayed for them. Some atheists even become upset when a "bless you" is uttered in response to a sneeze (or expected in response to one). There may be a variety of reasons for these negative responses.¹² But when atheists express anger or distress following a theist's request that they pray, at least in some cases, something like the following argument seems to be motivating them:

Inappropriate Requests for Prayer

1. Atheists, while atheists, cannot pray to God.
2. It is inappropriate to request something of an atheist that, while they're an atheist, they cannot do.
3. So, it is inappropriate to request of atheists that they pray.

That is: if you ask an atheist to pray to God, and praying either requires that the atheist converts to theism or, holding fixed that they remain an

¹²I want to emphasize that I am not claiming that atheists always or even usually have arguments such as the Inappropriate Request for Prayer Argument in mind when they have negative reactions to being asked to pray or being told "bless you" in response to a sneeze. For instance, they may instead be upset at what they take to be evidence of a widespread belief that everyone should believe in God and be religious. The same frustration may apply to saying "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and the sense that politicians must proclaim their belief in God in order to be successful. Atheists may be negatively reacting to what they take as evidence of theism/being religious as being treated not only as statistically dominant but as normatively dominant as well.

atheist, is something they cannot do, then you have made an inappropriate request.

I do not intend to suggest that the Foxhole arguments I've given are endorsed by most theists, or that something like the Inappropriate Requests argument is supported by most atheists. Instead, I simply wish to note that these seem to be popular arguments, and each depends on the assumption that atheistic prayer to God is impossible.

2.2. Limited Atheistic "Prayer"

According to a 2014 PEW Research poll, 3 percent of atheists self-report as praying at least monthly, with 1 percent of atheists praying daily.¹³ But discussions of atheistic prayer typically do not focus on *prayer to God*, but rather prayer *simpliciter*, or prayer to something other than God. (For instance, the PEW survey asked about prayer, but not specifically about prayer to God.) Atheistic prayer is presented as prayer that involves saying the words, performing the actions, and perhaps even reflecting on one's desires and attitudes of fear, love, and gratitude, but not actually directing communicative acts toward God.

For instance, in a 2013 *Psychology Today* article, the author lists a few options for who or what atheists may be praying to: "The air. The universe. The self." An atheistic blogger says that when he prays, he is addressing what he calls the "externality construct": "I might give it a name, like 'The Universe,' or 'All-That-Is-Not-Me,' or 'Layer Zero,' . . . but the name doesn't matter. The entity I'm addressing exists in my mind—a construct. But it *feels* like I'm addressing someone outside of myself—an externality." Another praying atheist, discussed in the *Washington Post*, prays to a goddess he made up.

We can find similar sentiments in the philosophical literature as well. For instance, David Benatar argues that atheists can reasonably engage in religious practices, even "praying" in the sense of saying the words theists do.¹⁴ But he follows this up by saying, "The foregoing is not to deny that there seems to be something odd about atheists offering prayers and doing 'God-talk.' But this is only so if one takes prayer literally to be communication with God. Matters are different if one views it more metaphorically or merely as another ritual."¹⁵ Atheistic prayer to God, for Benatar, cannot be communication atheists direct at God. Instead, it is a mere mimicry of theistic prayer, or communication directed to something

¹³An earlier PEW study, in 2012, listed 33 percent of those as identifying as neither spiritual nor religious as self-reporting as praying at least monthly. 17 percent of those who identify as atheist or agnostic self-report as praying at least monthly. Neither of these pieces of information allow us to conclude anything specific about how much those who identify as atheists pray, however. (For instance, there may be a lot of praying agnostics. And there may be a lot of non-praying atheists who still participate in religious traditions, and so report as religious. I don't want to suggest an interpretation of this information, just that we should be cautious in the conclusions we draw from it).

¹⁴Benatar, "What's God Got To Do With It?," 394.

¹⁵Benatar, "What's God Got To Do With It?," 396.

non-divine. Or it may involve heavy use of non-literal language. When atheists say “Our Lord in heaven,” Benatar says, they are speaking metaphorically, as someone may be when they call their spouse “pumpkin” without believing they are married to a pumpkin.¹⁶

In addition to atheistic prayer not being presented as prayer to God, the reasons given for such atheistic prayer are typically unlike those discussed for theistic prayer. For atheists, the suggestion is that prayer is beneficial primarily because it allows one to participate in a comfortable tradition, it encourages self-reflection, it encourages empathy, it provides a way to show solidarity with others who pray, etc. In the *Washington Post* article mentioned above, the atheist is described as having a “hunger for a transcendent experience,” and wanting the humility that comes with petitioning for things out of his control rather than simply desiring them. Of course, these can all be benefits for theists as well, but they are typically not presented as the central reasons for theists to engage in prayer. Instead, for theists the reasons to pray often include fostering a relationship with God, increasing focus on and understanding of God,¹⁷ *communicating* gratitude and desires, and sometimes, even receiving goods as a result of petitioning for them.

It should be noted, some authors do argue that atheistic prayer can be motivated by wanting to receive goods from God. Lemos argues that agnostics can, and in fact should, petition God for goods (such as the healing of a sick child). He then extends the argument to atheistic prayer. Dumsday provides additional reasons for thinking that, given that atheistic prayer to God is possible, atheists ought to petition God for goods. And Mawson argues that atheists should pray for God to reveal Himself. However, as even some of these authors note, they seem to have the minority opinion.

I agree that the motivation typically given for atheistic prayer (encouraged self-reflection, development of empathy, etc.) may, indeed, be excellent motivation to pray. I also agree that there are many kinds of prayer, and that even prayer may be directed toward entities other than God. But I will argue that, in attempting to make sense of atheistic prayer, we should not assume that any praying atheists must be praying to some non-divine entity (such as themselves, the universe, whatever) or mimicking the act of prayer. And I will argue that we needn't assume that praying atheists must be doing it primarily for the benefits of self-reflection, community-building, etc. First, though, because the prevailing sentiment is so strongly against the possibility of atheistic prayer, we should turn to why that might be the case.

¹⁶Benatar, “What’s God Got To Do With It?,” 396.

¹⁷For instance, from St. Augustine’s *On the Sermon on the Mount* (ch. 3, §14): “We are not always ready to receive, since we are inclined towards other things, and are involved in darkness through our desire for temporal things. Hence there is brought about in prayer a turning of the heart to Him, who is ever ready to give, if we will but take what He has given.”

3. The Metaphysical Incoherence Objection

In considering prayer to God as communication directed at God, the immediate objection is that atheistic prayer is incoherent, because directing communication at any entity requires believing that the entity exists (or at least, not disbelieving that the entity exists). In this section, I'll more carefully present what I take to be the argument against atheistic prayer in this vicinity. Then I will discuss the picture of atheistic prayer presented by Kenny, Lemos, and Mawson, and show how it may be used to respond to this argument. Finally, I will expand on this picture of atheistic prayer, and describe how it can be used to show that atheistic prayer can, in many ways, share the character, motivation, and benefits of theistic prayer.

3.1. The Intentionality Argument

The intuition behind this objection to atheistic prayer is that the very notion of praying somehow precludes atheists praying to God. One may believe that offering prayer to God is metaphysically incompatible with disbelieving in God. Even stronger, one may claim that the notion *prayer to God* analytically entails that the subject lacks disbelief in God; part of the concept of *prayer to God* is *belief in God* or even just *lack of disbelief in God*. Thus, in addition to finding atheistic prayer metaphysically incoherent, one may find it conceptually or analytically incoherent. Assuming that analytic impossibility entails metaphysical impossibility, I will present these worries together as worries for metaphysical possibility. But it's worth pointing out that there are multiple ways to endorse this line of argument.

In attempting to establish the entailment from a subject's praying to God to their lacking disbelief in God, one may claim: directing communication at an entity requires, as a matter of necessity and perhaps as a component of the concept, intending to communicate with that entity. That is, they may endorse:

The Intentionality Requirement for Communication: Necessarily, any time a subject *s* directs a communicative act at an entity *e*, *s* intends to communicate to *e*.¹⁸

There is an immediate objection one may give to this principle, and examining it will better illuminate what the principle commits us to. Suppose it is late at night, and you are struggling to sleep before an early start the next morning. A leaky faucet in the next room has been waking you each time you've nearly lost consciousness. Finally, exasperated, you yell at it, "Shut up!" You know it doesn't hear you, and you never intended it to, but you feel a tiny bit better. According to the principle above, either

¹⁸Importantly, the principle does not require that *s* intends to communicate to *e* the content of *s*'s communicative act. Otherwise, lying and talking to infants would be ruled out as directed communicative acts.

what you performed was not a communicative act directed at the faucet, or you briefly intended to communicate to the faucet. While one might argue that in your sleepy state you were confused about the faucet's abilities to understand you, the first alternative is more plausible: sometimes things that look like communicative acts are not, really. Things that feel like communicative acts may be done out of habit, out of mimicry, etc. Something sets genuine communicative acts apart from these imposters, and the above principle is a good candidate for drawing this distinction.

In addition to the Intentionality Requirement for Communication, we may also wish to endorse a claim about the requirements of some kinds of intentions. We may think, either as a matter of necessity or even as an analytic truth, that any time a subject intends to relate in a particular way to something, the subject must think that thing exists (or at least, the subject must not believe it doesn't). That is:

The Belief Requirement for Directed Intentionality: Necessarily, if s intends to stand in R to some y such that Fy , then s believes (or at least, lacks disbelief) that there exists some z such that Fz .

Intuitions about cases seem to support this principle. You cannot intend to visit a house that you believe will never be created. You cannot intend to meet a deadline that you think you don't have. You cannot intend to jump over a rock that you believe isn't there. You can, however, intend to *pretend* you'll go to such a house, you can *act as if* you're meeting such a deadline, and you can jump over a *rock-hologram* or a *pretend-rock*. Similarly, you cannot intend to communicate with something that you think does not exist, though you can intend to mimic such communicative acts.

We can combine these principles to produce a Metaphysical Incoherence Argument against the possibility of atheistic prayer. If I believe that God does not exist, then I cannot intend to communicate to Him. And if I cannot intend to direct communication to Him, I cannot direct a communicative act toward Him. The best I can hope for with atheistic prayer, then, is a mere mimicking of the actions of theists who pray.

The Intentionality Argument

1. Necessarily, praying to God involves directing communicative acts toward God.
2. Necessarily, directing communicative acts toward God involves intending to communicate to God.
3. Necessarily, intending to communicate to someone, x , requires the belief (or at least, lack of disbelief) that x exists.
4. Necessarily, if y believes (or at least, lacks disbelief) that God exists, then y is not an atheist.
5. So, necessarily, praying to God is incompatible with being an atheist.

Premise (1) follows from our account of prayer. Premise (2) is an application of The Intentionality Requirement for Communication. Premise (3) is an application of The Belief Requirement for Directed Intentionality. And premise (4), when involving a lack of disbelief, follows from our account of atheism. When premise (4) is instead read as involving belief, then it gives the result that the subject is not *merely* an atheist (for they are a theist as well), and the conclusion will have to be amended to say that praying to God is incompatible with failing to be a theist.

Two notes before we move on to responding to the argument. First, once again, it should be observed that an argument like this may motivate one to think that belief in God (or lack of disbelief in God) is partly constitutive of prayer to God, but endorsing that claim is not required for endorsing the argument.

It should also be noted that there are other options for presenting Metaphysical Incoherence Objections to the possibility of atheistic prayer. The project is to find a conceptually or metaphysically necessary connection between prayer to God and lack of disbelief in God. I have chosen one route that I take to capture my intuitions about (at least some of) the strangeness of atheistic prayer. There are others, and we will return to this topic at the conclusion of the next section.

3.2. A Picture of Atheistic Prayer

In responding to the Intentionality Argument, we may already have a particular premise that we would like to reject. We have, for instance, already described objections to the Intentionality Requirement for Communication, and it is hard to see why that principle would be false but a restricted version of the principle applying only to God would be true. However, in the literature defending the possibility of atheistic prayer, the defense has come by way of analogy. And our response to the Intentionality Argument can invoke this as well, allowing us to remain neutral on which premise to take to be false.

Anthony Kenny argues that belief in God is not required for praying to God. He presents us with analogies, saying, "It is surely no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen."¹⁹ In each of these cases, a subject seems to direct a communicative act toward an entity meeting some description (such as *is able to rescue me*), in spite of not believing that any such person is around to witness it. We are not inclined to say that, due to the lack of belief, the subjects in these cases are failing to perform directed communicative acts; they are not somehow merely mimicking attempts at communication. Similarly, an agnostic may reach out to God through prayer, while not believing that God actually exists.

¹⁹Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, 129.

John Lemos has presented similar analogies in relation to atheistic prayer, rather than in relation to agnostic prayer. He says:

Suppose that I am sitting in my room working on a project that requires the use of some scissors. Suppose it is a time of day in which my wife is usually not in the house. Consequently I do not believe that she is in the house. Perhaps I even believe that she is out of the house. Even so suppose also that I am feeling quite lazy at the time and so I say, "Darling, will you please fetch me some scissors from the kitchen" in the faint hope that she is there to respond. Here I would have intentionally addressed language to someone while not believing that they are present to hear and yet doing so is rational.²⁰

In this case the subject disbelieves in the existence of someone meeting a particular description (*is my wife, and is in the house*) but reaches out with a communicative action directed at such a person anyway. We are not tempted to say that Lemos's request for scissors in this case fails to be a directed communicative act, but his otherwise indistinguishable request is a directed communicative act when he believes his wife is at home. And just as Lemos may request scissors of his wife in the above situation, we may say an atheist can believe that God does not exist, but offer a prayer to Him just in case.

Tim Mawson, in response to Kenny's case, also presents analogies showing that atheistic prayer to God seems possible. He says:

The person who prays that God help him or her to believe in Him is as reasonable as someone who finds himself or herself shouting 'Is anyone there?' in a darkened room about which he or she has various reasonable prior beliefs. . . . Finding himself or herself in the room today the person . . . realizes that he or she has no other more pressing business . . . and shouts, "Is there anyone there?"; "If you're there wise old man, please answer me!" . . . Such a person may be reasonable in doing this . . . if an "atheist" about the wise old man.²¹

In Mawson's case, the person in the darkened room believes there is not a wise old man in the room (though the subject is aware of some debate about that fact). Still, they direct a communicative act toward any such wise old man in the room who may exist.²²

The cases presented above seem possible. And in the cases, the subject directs communication toward someone though they believe that no such person exists. So it cannot be generally true that, necessarily, if x directs a communicative act toward y (or toward anyone with some feature, F), then

²⁰Lemos, "An Agnostic Defense of Obligatory Prayer," 74–75.

²¹Mawson, "Praying to Stop Being an Atheist," 174.

²²Mawson's aim is to show that atheists should, generally, pray to God to reveal Himself. Though Mawson describes several constraints on this norm, including the condition that it applies only when the atheist has the belief that they will not misconstrue any responses. I will not include any such restrictions, in part because I am interested primarily in the possibility and epistemic coherence of atheistic prayer; the issue of whether engaging in it is a good idea is beyond the scope of this paper.

x must believe that y exists (or must believe that someone with feature F exists). But if this general principle does not hold, then we cannot appeal to it in support of premises (2) or (3) of the Intentionality Argument. And, because prayer to God does not seem *relevantly* dissimilar to the communicative acts in the above cases, it does not seem that a restriction of the principle to applying only to prayer to God would be plausible. Thus, we may present the following argument:

Against the Intentionality Argument

1. The cases described above are possible cases of one person directing communication toward another person (or toward anyone with a particular property), though they believe that no such person exists.
2. These cases are relevantly similar to an atheist directing communication toward God, though they believe God does not exist.
3. So, it is possible for an atheist to direct communication toward God, though they believe God does not exist.

One may reject this argument by rejecting my claim that the communicative acts in the cases above are relevantly similar to atheistic prayer to God. One way to do so is to claim that prayer is not any ordinary form of communication. Prayer to God has special features that place extra restrictions on its practice, and which preclude atheists in participating in it.

Offering this objection will require endorsing a different version of the Metaphysical Incoherence Objection, based on the special aspects of prayer that set it apart from typical communication. For instance, one may claim that prayer to God requires not only directing communication toward God, but also approaching God with faith.

I think this strategy is a natural way for the proponent of the Metaphysical Incoherence Objection to go, and this particular example of how to carry it out is initially compelling. Prayer does seem to be a special form of communication in many ways, and approaching God with faith seems to be an important part of having a thriving relationship with Him. It is tempting to bundle these features into our account of prayer. However, it may result in an account that is overly restrictive: we do not want to claim that, when someone who is ordinarily a theist is having a sudden and significant crisis of faith, perhaps enough to plunge them into agnosticism, they are unable to pray. They may be unable to pray with faith, but it seems they can still reach out to God. Our requirement, then, cannot be that prayer to God always includes faith in God. But it is unclear which weaker position we should retreat to. We might claim that prayer to God is special in that it requires approaching God with a lack of disbelief in Him. This no longer plausibly captures a natural component of prayer; it is hard to see why we should think that prayer has this feature and is thereby set apart from other forms of communication.

3.3. *Expansion of the Model*

If the kinds of cases offered above are analogous to atheistic prayer to God, then atheistic prayer to God is more similar to theistic prayer than we may have imagined. To see why, consider first my own example of a case analogous to atheistic prayer to God, and then an expansion of the case.

Post-Apocalyptic Call: Adam is wandering around in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. He comes across a payphone. Adam strongly believes that this phone will not succeed in placing calls to any other people: there are unlikely to be many other people left, the phone looks broken and like it will not succeed in placing calls at all, and whatever infrastructure supported placing phone calls is likely to have been destroyed. However, Adam requires rescue in order to live. So, in spite of believing the phone will not work (and in spite of believing no one is around to pick up even if it does work), Adam lifts the receiver and attempts to place a call. After dialing the number, Adam says into the phone, "Hello, I need rescue. I'm at [address]."

Adam strongly believes that there is no one at the other end of the line. However, Adam nonetheless attempts to communicate a message to such a person. And, if the phone call succeeds, Adam may successfully communicate a message to such a person.

Again, if there can be communicative acts directed toward a (perhaps non-existent) person in a possible case like this one, then it seems that one could direct communicative acts toward (perhaps non-existent) God. In my case, it seems that either Adam directs a communicative act toward someone at the other end of the line without (due perhaps to lack of hope) intending to communicate with such a person, or Adam intends to communicate with such a person, but is not thereby precluded from disbelieving that such a person exists. Our attitudes about which of these options is more plausible give us some guide to which of the premises of The Intentionality Argument to reject.

But here's what's new: consider the following extension of the previous case.

Post-Apocalyptic Conversation: Adam was too close to the apocalyptic explosions, and is now unable to hear clearly. Upon dialing the number and waiting an appropriate amount of time, Adam says "Hello, I need rescue. I'm at [address]." Adam then hears something. It might be a person saying "Please repeat that. Say your address again." Adam actually and strongly believes, though, that it is merely a recording saying "Please hang up and try your call again" indicating that the call was unsuccessful. Because of Adam's diminished ability to hear, because what Adam *did* manage to hear sounded more like the recording than a person asking for the address, and because of Adam's strong evidence that the infrastructure needed for his call to be placed has been destroyed, Adam strongly believes that there is no one at the other end

of the line. Still, Adam is desperate, and also has nothing better to do. Adam responds by repeating the address.

In this case, if there is a person at the other end of the line, Adam seems to be communicating with that person. They can exchange information several times, all while Adam believes there is no one there. Adam can communicate while being unaware of successfully doing so, and while believing that such communication is not occurring.

Similarly, if God exists, an atheist may be able to not only pray to God, but also to communicate with God without realizing it. They may receive goods as results of their prayers, though believe that the goods were received coincidentally. They may receive guidance as a result of their inquiries, though believe that the input came from another source and was unrelated (or at least, not divinely related) to their questioning. They may confide in God, and receive comfort from Him, but believe that comfort has a non-divine source. They may thank God for His acts, and God may indicate His pleasure with this, though the atheist does not believe Him to have done so. They may come to enjoy talking to God, and think that if God exists He is good and caring and wise, all while believing that God does not exist. They may regularly act in accordance with what God indicates is His will, though they believe that this is not what has been indicated to them. For instance, an atheist may pray to ask whether it is God's will that they move, and a moment later find a moving truck in their driveway and a driver asking for directions. The atheist may believe that this is merely a coincidence, but act as if it were an indication from God because they are ambivalent about the choice anyway, and on the off-chance that God does exist, it wouldn't be terrible to act as He wills. Atheists, if God exists, may share in many of the benefits of prayer that theists enjoy, and may thereby share much of the motivation for prayer as well. And, if God does not exist, then praying atheists and theists are again similar, for neither is a recipient of God-involving goods.

Two final notes on the variety of ways atheistic prayer may manifest. First, several authors have argued or assumed that praying to God requires hoping that God exists.²³ Even if this is not true of prayer in general, we may be tempted to endorse it for atheistic prayer in particular: we may think that prayer does not require belief in God, and that prayer is even compatible with disbelief in God. But, we may think, the atheist must have at least some kind of pro-attitude toward God's existence in order to pray.²⁴ We may settle on hope as a good candidate: even if the atheist does

²³See Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*; Pojman, *Religious Belief and The Will*; and Lemos, "An Agnostic Defense of Obligatory Prayer."

²⁴There is a related question, brought to my attention by Mark Murphy, of whether one must have some sort of pro-attitude toward God in order to pray. One might think that in order to conceive of God (at least, *qua* God), you must recognize that God is good. And in order to direct communication at God, you must conceive of God (or: in order to direct communication at God *qua* God, you must conceive of God *qua* God). I'm unsure of the claim

not accept God's existence, or resolve to generally act as if God exists, the atheist must at least hope God exists. Otherwise, why are they praying?

In response to this, I should first point out that it is not clear to me that the atheist must have any pro-attitude toward God's existence in order to pray. It is not clear to me that the atheist must hope that God exists, or even must allow for the epistemic possibility that God exists. Though it may be hard to imagine why an atheist would pray to a God they are certain does not exist, it is not clearly an impossible or irrational task. (For more on this, see §4.2.) Second, even if we think there must be some pro-attitude, it is implausible for hope to play this role unless we think it is required for all prayer. And it is not a plausible requirement for all prayer. A theist may prefer that God not exist: imagine a less resilient Job, for instance. And similarly, an atheist may feel relieved at the likelihood that God does not exist, and fearful about the epistemic possibility (however small) that He does exist. For instance, consider a serial-murdering atheist on his deathbed. The murderer may strongly believe that God does not exist, but may also think that if God does exist, his afterlife will be terrible, much worse than nonexistence. With nothing else to do, the murderer may pray for forgiveness and a small amount of mercy in his last moments, all while believing and strongly hoping that no divine entity hears his prayers. Dread, regret, or fear of God's existence are neither off-limits to theists, nor reserved for them.

Second, we should ask about any limitations on the content of atheistic prayer. If an atheist believes God does not exist, can the atheist give thanks to God through prayer? Can the atheist praise God, if the atheist does not endorse the predications? Can an atheist express anger at God? There are multiple options for how one may go in response to this. First, the atheist may appeal to a positive free logic: they may believe (but perhaps not be certain) that "God" is an empty name for a deity. They may think that predicates can be truly applied to the noun-phrase "God" without this entailing that a referent of "God" exists. Andrew Bacon has shown how a positive free logic can help us make sense of seemingly true statements about fictional characters, such as the sentence "Sherlock Holmes is an excellent detective."²⁵ When our atheist prays to God, they may take themselves to be making similar statements, and they may even believe the statements are about a fictional character, but they may not be certain of that.

Alternatively, we may opt for a response that posits less similarity between the content of theistic prayers and atheistic ones. Atheistic expressions of thanksgiving, praise, anger, and so on, may be somehow conditional in a way theistic expressions are not. This option has some

that conceiving of God (even *qua* God) requires recognition that God is good, but the question illustrates that the issue of what's required for prayer is more complicated than it may initially seem.

²⁵Bacon, "Quantificational Logic and Empty Names."

support from analogous cases. For instance, suppose you are roaming the library looking for Bernadete's *Infinity*, and have been expressing frustration under your breath for the last few minutes. You return to a table you've passed before, and see it perched on the edge. You think you're alone in this part of the library, and that you must've just missed the book earlier. But you think there is a tiny chance that someone else was in the library, heard your muttering about the book, saw it, and set it out for you. You say loudly, "Thank you!" in case such a person is in the room. You aren't straightforwardly grateful, but somehow you are conditionally thankful. Other attitudes can have conditional flavors as well. For instance, suppose I receive a copy of Casati and Varzi's *Holes*, with a bunch of holes punched in the cover. I believe that this was done in the production of the book, but I feel a zing of anger considering the possibility that someone thought it'd be funny to use a hole-puncher on this particular book before sending it to me. I don't believe such a person exists, but have a negative attitude toward any such person. Conditional guilt is also common: "I'm sorry if . . ." is commonly used when we're not sure whether our actions had a negative outcome, but it may also be used if we aren't sure if our actions had a victim (and may be directed toward any such potential victim). These cases indicate that there is precedent for conditional reactions and the statements that express them. It may be that whatever story we tell for such statements can be applied to atheistic prayer as well.

4. *The Epistemic Incoherence Objection*

Atheistic prayer seems to depend on the ability to direct communication toward someone while believing they do not exist. Our response to the Intentionality Argument involved claiming that such communicative attempts can occur when directed at non-divine entities, so we should think they can occur when directed at divine entities as well.

But, one may object, we should not be so fast to claim that this sort of activity can occur even in non-divine contexts. Directing communication toward some entity while believing it does not exist entails a kind of epistemic incoherence, which is either metaphysically impossible or epistemically reprehensible. Neither outcome is a good result for our atheist attempting prayer. This is the Epistemic Incoherence Objection.

4.1. *The Might Argument*

One way to put forward the Epistemic Incoherence Objection is to appeal to the role of beliefs about what *might* be the case. Consider the Post-Apocalyptic Call case. The proponent of this objection may claim that in this case, it seems that by attempting the call Adam displays that he is unsure of whether someone will pick up. That is, it's a live epistemic possibility for him that there will be someone on the other end of the line. Otherwise, why bother? And in the Post-Apocalyptic Conversation case, by repeating his address, Adam displays that he thinks there might be someone else hearing it. Adam is showing that he is not certain that there is no one at

the other end of the line. Similarly, the proponent of this objection may continue, when a supposed-atheist attempts prayer, they are showing that they at least believe that God *might* exist. And if an atheist were to react to something (such as the appearance of a moving truck) as if it were a sign from God, they are indicating that they believe it at least *might* be a sign from God.

This, though, looks problematic. The proponent of this objection will claim that it is either metaphysically impossible to believe *might(P) and ¬P*, or it is epistemically inconsistent. Someone cannot really, or at least consistently, believe that God does not exist if, at the same time, they endorse that God *might* exist, and so admit to themselves that they cannot rule out His existence. So when so-called atheists pray, they are at that time (and perhaps other times as well) either not really atheists, or not consistent atheists. Similarly, when Adam makes his call in the post-apocalyptic wasteland, he either does not really believe that there is no one at the other end of the line, or he has inconsistent beliefs. The actions of these individuals show what they think *might* be the case, and that gives us information about what they consistently believe.

The proponent of this objection might give an argument like this one:

The Might Argument

1. Necessarily, if a subject prays to God, then the subject believes God might exist.
2. Necessarily, the belief that God might exist is either metaphysically or epistemically incompatible with the belief that God does not exist.
3. So, necessarily, if a subject believes God might exist, then either the subject does not believe God does not exist, or the subject is epistemically inconsistent.
4. Necessarily, if you do not believe God does not exist, then you are not an atheist.
5. So, praying to God is incompatible with being an epistemically consistent atheist.

Premise (4) follows from what it means to be an atheist (as we're understanding the term), so the work is being done by premises (1) and (2). I will briefly say a bit more about why one may find (2) plausible.

Seth Yalcin has pointed out that epistemic modals can produce conjunctive statements that have some similarity to Moore's paradox.²⁶ With Moore's paradox, we find statements of the form "*P, and I don't know that P*" unacceptable. We may hope to explain this via appeal to a norm of assertion: you shouldn't assert something unless you take yourself to know

²⁶Yalcin, "Epistemic Modals."

it (or at least, don't believe you don't know it). Thus, we may hope to give a wholly pragmatic explanation of the unacceptability of the statement.

Yalcin points out that sentences of the form "*P*, and *Might*($\neg P$)" also sound unacceptable. Saying, for instance, that it might not be raining, seems to communicate that you have not ruled out it's not raining. But if you haven't ruled out it's not raining, then you shouldn't assert that it is raining. But this pragmatic issue, Yalcin argues, cannot be the whole problem. For epistemic modal conjunctions, unlike Moorean conjunctions, cannot be embedded in conditionals and as suppositions. Consider the sentence "If it's raining, but it might not be raining, then give me the umbrella" and "Suppose it is raining, and it might not be raining." Both of these strike us as strange, and perhaps even as unintelligible. If the problem with epistemic modal conjunctions was entirely about their assertability, we would expect the problem to resolve with their being embedded rather than asserted. But the problem persists, suggesting that the problem is with the semantic content of the conjunction. That is, it looks like there is an inconsistency or impossibility in the combination of *P* and *Might*($\neg P$).

Atheists (as we are using the term) endorse the claim that God does not exist. But also (perhaps due to having some degree of epistemic humility), many take themselves to be unable to rule out with certainty that God does exist, and will readily accept that God might exist. Praying atheists give us even more evidence that they think God might exist, and are reacting to the very fact that they haven't ruled out His existence. So, these atheists should (pragmatic and practical issues aside) be willing to assert each of: "God does not exist" and "It might be that God exists." But if they are willing to assert each of these, they should also be willing (again, pragmatic and practical issues aside) to assert their conjunction. So, at the very least, praying atheists face a puzzle about how to explain the apparent unacceptability of a conjunction they should be willing to assert. Worse, though, is this: if the conjunction is problematic because its semantic content is inconsistent, then in order to endorse each of the conjuncts our atheist will have to have inconsistent beliefs. If one takes this to be impossible, then either our subject is not an atheist or does not really think God might exist. If one takes it to be possible, our atheist seems epistemically inconsistent.

4.2. Responses to the *Might* Argument

There are many ways of responding to Yalcin's argument about epistemic conjunctions²⁷ as well as many ways of responding to the application of that argument to the issue of praying atheists. I will cover just a few of the responses here.

²⁷See, for instance, Schneider, "Expressivism Concerning Epistemic Modals"; Crabbill, "Suppose Yalcin is Wrong About Epistemic Modals"; and Schroeder, *Expressing Our Attitudes*.

First, in response to the Might Argument, we may simply say that acting as if something is a live epistemic possibility for you is not a guarantee that it is a live possibility for you. And one needn't be acting irrationally for this to be the case. For instance, consider: a child believes there are faeries in her closet. She asks her mom to say "good night" to the faeries. The mother, absolutely confident that there are no such faeries, says "to any faeries in my daughter's closet, goodnight and sleep tight!" The aim of the action is not to communicate. Nonetheless, this seems to be an example of a communicative act directed at entities with particular features. And this is so in spite of the subject's failing to think that such entities even just *might* exist.

One might resist this response, however. One may maintain that in the faeries case, the mother is simply pretending to produce a communicative act, rather than really doing so. Also, even if this first response to the Might Argument is successful, it would not help establish the possibility of atheistic prayer for any atheist who believes that God might exist. And such atheists are not uncommon. When talking about motivation for atheistic prayer, it is common to note that atheists often hope (though they believe it will not be so) that their prayers will be heard and answered. Such atheists may readily grant that they think God might exist, though they also believe He does not. What are we to make of such atheists?

First, we should note that the epistemic inconsistency worry is not restricted to praying atheists, or even to atheists at all. Praying atheists are not the only sort of atheist to readily admit that, though they believe God does not exist, they are not certain that He does not exist. That is, this issue arises for any atheist who, on the basis of being unwilling to say they are *certain* that God does not exist, concedes that God might exist. And more importantly, this general problem is not just an issue for atheists, it is an issue for anyone who thinks that they believe something, but who also fails to believe it with certainty and so is willing to concede that the contrary *might* be the case. This is not at all uncommon. For instance, I believe that the sun will not explode within the next year. I am not, however, absolutely certain this is the case. In that sense, I think it *might* be true that the sun will explode within the next year, though I disbelieve it. So, if the problem of epistemic inconsistency is an issue for praying atheists, it is an issue for many, many people.

What should we say about this general problem? First, though intuitions push in favor of the unacceptability of epistemic modal conjunctions, intuitions also push strongly for the compatibility of belief and lack of certainty. Intuitively, we needn't rule out something with certainty in order to believe its negation. We can believe something without being sure. And plausibly, this is not epistemically inconsistent or objectionable. Perhaps it would be better if we always had excellent evidence and were able to justifiably believe with certainty in all things we endorse. But given that we do not always have such exceptional evidence, but still often have good

evidence, belief without certainty seems appropriate. Belief with a dose of epistemic humility is a good thing. So, insofar as a subject's believing that they cannot rule something out entails that they believe it might be so, we should accept that subjects can believe something might be true while believing its negation, and we should take this to be an often reasonable and commendable combination of attitudes.

This appeal to intuitions is not, however, a complete response to the epistemic inconsistency worry. For we need to also explain why we have strong intuitions that epistemic modal conjunctions are unacceptable. Here is one way that we may attempt to do so. So far, in my discussion of responses to the Might Argument, I have been treating "might" as if it should be read as "I can't rule it out with certainty." That is, I have been using the following is a very weak sense of "might":

"might be true" =_{df} is not ruled out with certainty²⁸

The fact that this sense of "might be true" is so weak is part of why it is so plausibly compatible with a wide variety of beliefs. Stronger senses of "might" are less plausibly widely compatible. A clear example:

"might be true" =_{df} is compatible with the content of my beliefs

This sense of "might" gives a straightforward contradiction in the content of the beliefs of a subject who believes both that *might*(*P*) and (\neg *P*). Here, then, is a partial explanation for the unacceptability of our epistemic modal conjunctions: when we say something of the form "*Might*(*P*) and (\neg *P*)," "might" is heard in the strong sense, leading to incompatibility of the conjuncts and unembeddability of the statement. If we were to take "might" in the weaker sense, though the initial conjunction may still sound strange, it is no longer unembeddable. Consider: "I'm not certain that *P*, but *P*" still sounds strange to us, but "Suppose I'm not certain that *P*, but *P*" does not sound strange. This indicates that when statements of epistemic modal conjunctions involve "might" with a weak reading, the problems with them are merely pragmatic rather than generated by the content of the conjuncts.

In attempting to respond to the Might Argument, then, we may say the following: premise (1) of the argument is only plausible when we use a weak reading of "might," taking it to mean that what it is applied to hasn't been ruled out with certainty. Premise (2), on the other hand, is only plausible when using a stronger sense of "might," such as *being compatible with the content of my beliefs*. The Might Argument seems to involve equivocation.

A natural initial move in response to this is to claim that praying atheists are committed to believing that God might exist, in the stronger sense

²⁸Importantly, I intend these definitions to be rough, general-ballpark definitions. I definitely do not think these are plausible, exact accounts of any of the readings of "might," but I do take them to be in the right general area.

of “might.” It is up to the proponent of the Might Argument to support this. They may try to do so by claiming the following:

The Actions Speak Louder Principle: Necessarily, anyone who acts as if *P* is true, takes *P* to be a live possibility.

There are many ways that we might precisely formulate this principle, each corresponding to different notions of *taking P to be a live possibility*. Just a few options: (a) not having any beliefs incompatible with *P*, (b) not believing one has any beliefs in the truth of anything incompatible with *P*, (c) failing to disbelieve that *P*, and so on. Regardless of how we precisely formulate it, however, the general idea behind the Actions Speak Louder Principle is the same: anyone who *acts* as if *P* is true has doxastic states that are also somehow in accordance with *P*'s truth.

However, this general idea is false. To see why, consider something you believe arbitrarily strongly, but are not absolutely certain about. Suppose you are offered a bet: you pay a penny if you are right in your belief, but you get an arbitrarily high sum of money if you are wrong. I imagine that most would take the bet. But that means that for any belief that we do not hold with absolute certainty, we are disposed to act as if its negation is a live possibility (at least, in some sense). And according to the proponent of the Actions Speak Louder Principle, if we were to suddenly find ourselves in a betting situation like this one for any of our beliefs that we do not hold with certainty, we would no longer have those beliefs (or would not believe we had them, or would not believe they were incompatible with their negations). This does not seem to be the right description of the doxastic states of the agents in betting situations like these. So this attempt to show that praying atheists endorse the claim that God might exist, in the strong sense of “might,” does not seem to be successful.

So, worries about epistemic modal conjunctions seem to apply to everyone; it is not a special issue for praying atheists. And attempts to raise special concerns involving epistemic modal conjunctions for praying atheists, via appeal to the activity of prayer indicating that God's existence is being treated as a live possibility, appear unsuccessful. There is much more to say, of course, but my hope is that I have shown that the proponent of the possibility of atheistic prayer has plausible avenues of response to each of the two arguments offered against it.²⁹

University of Southern California

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