

# The experiential problem for petitionary prayer

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**Abstract** Sometimes people petition God for things through prayer. This is puzzling, because if God always does what is best, it is not clear how these prayers can make a difference to what God does. Difference-Making accounts of petitionary prayer attempt to explain how these prayers can nonetheless influence what God does. I argue that, insofar as one is motivated to endorse a Difference-Making Account because they want to respect widespread intuitions about this feature of petitionary prayer, they should also be motivated to endorse an account of prayer that respects widespread intuitions about other central features of petitionary prayer. I describe three problematic cases and the intuitions we have about them, and show how these intuitions restrict any Difference-Making account of petitionary prayer.

**Keywords** Petitionary prayer · God · Philosophy of religion · Divine attributes

Petitionary prayer, in which prayer-givers petition God for things through prayer, is very common. But there is a puzzle about how to explain why one might engage in petitionary prayer, because it is hard to see how prayers can make a difference to what God (understood in the sense of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent creator of the world) does: if God exists, God already has the knowledge, power and motivation to do what is best. Given these features, it looks like God will do the best

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that He can do. So, one might worry, either petitionary prayers are already for what it's best for God to do, in which case He would do it anyway, or they are for something it's not best for God to do, in which case the prayers will go unanswered. Petitionary prayers are thus powerless, so participating in the practice of petitionary prayer appears pointless.

I will distinguish between multiple puzzles here: a *logical* problem, about how difference-making petitionary prayer is even possible, and an *experiential* problem, about how petitionary prayer might *actually* make the kinds of differences they are commonly taken to be able to make.<sup>1</sup> We could respond to each of these puzzles by claiming that people offering petitionary prayers are widely mistaken about the nature of those prayers: though petitionary prayer may have a number of benefits, it is never the case that, due to these prayers, God does something He would not have otherwise done. However, it would be preferable to give a less revisionary response, one on which petitionary prayers really do make a difference. Many philosophers have done this in response to the Logical Puzzle: they endorse what I will call “Difference-Making Solutions” to the Problem of Petitionary Prayer.

I will claim that, insofar as a desire to vindicate widespread intuitions about petitionary prayer motivates us to accept a Difference-Making Solution to the Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer, we should also be motivated to accept a Difference-Making Solution to the Experiential Problem. But the Experiential Problem puts more constraints on acceptable Difference-Making Solutions. In particular, the proponent of a Difference-Making Solution will face three additional puzzles: the Problem of Significant Petitionary Prayer, the Problem of Inappropriate Petitionary Prayer, and the Over-Responsibility Problem. I will argue that, in light of these additional puzzles, if one endorses a Difference-Making Solution they must explain how petitionary prayers have the potential to systematically lead to significant differences being made, while allowing that the differences frequently involve the targets of those prayers, rather than merely the prayer-givers and their relationship with God.<sup>2</sup> I do not try to argue that these challenges are insurmountable. Rather, my thesis is that the often-overlooked Experiential Problem of Petitionary Prayer places greater constraints on our theories, requiring us to make a much wider range of commitments than we may have expected. However, if one believes there is not a plausible way to address all of these difficulties, these problems may be taken to show that we should not take petitionary prayer to be difference-making.

<sup>1</sup> Authors also discuss related puzzles: about *God's* motivation for creating an institution of petitionary prayer, and about how one can rationally engage in petitionary prayer. Having an answer to the logical and/or experiential puzzles of petitionary prayer may help with solving these additional puzzles, but one can respond to each of these puzzles in very different ways.

<sup>2</sup> There is a straightforward response to the puzzles I raise: one can simply deny that God must always do what is best, and then allow for God to do things that are better than He would have otherwise done in response to petitionary prayers. However, this is a huge commitment about the nature of God. I'll discuss this response briefly later in the paper, but throughout the paper I'll be assuming that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good in a sense that requires Him to always do what's best.

## The logical problem of petitionary prayer

To begin, it will be helpful to distinguish between two versions of the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer.<sup>3</sup> The first version, the *Logical* puzzle, challenges us to demonstrate how we can even possibly rationally petition God, given God's essential features. The argument may go something like this:

### *The Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer*

1. Necessarily, if any petitionary prayer makes a difference<sup>4</sup> to what God does, then either God wouldn't always do what's best regardless of our prayers, or God doesn't always do what's best in light of our prayers.
2. Necessarily, God always does what's best regardless of our prayers, and God always does what's best in light of our prayers.
3. So, necessarily, no petitionary prayer makes a difference to what God does.

The idea behind the Logical Problem is that a prayer's making a difference to what God does is incompatible with God's being perfectly good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. For having those features entails that God will already do what is best (assuming we have a solution to the Problem of the Best), and they also entail that God will only act in accordance with a petition if it is a petition to do what already is best. So prayers may be overdetermining causes of God doing what is best, but they cannot make a *difference* to what God does because He will only grant requests for what's best, and he was going to do what's best anyway.

To generate a puzzle about the rationality or value of petitionary prayer, we can add the following two lines to the above argument:

### *The Pointlessness Problem of Petitionary Prayer.*

4. Necessarily, it is irrational/pointless to petition God for something through prayer unless it is possible for some petitionary prayer to make a difference to what God does.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Setting aside differences in topic, my distinction between the Logical and Experiential problems of petitionary prayer is similar to (and inspired by) the drawn by William Rowe (1979) between the Logical and Evidential arguments from evil. However, Rowe's Evidential argument is inductive, and my Experiential argument, like the Logical one, is deductive (it simply involves restriction to actual states of affairs, and additional constraints those bring).

<sup>4</sup> By "make a difference", throughout this paper, I will mean the following: *x*'s doing *A1* makes a difference to whether *y* does *A2* iff *x*'s doing *A1* is a cause of *y*'s doing *A2*, and *y*'s doing *A2* counterfactually depends on *x*'s doing *A1*. I do not endorse this as a general account of *making a difference*, and I do not intend to suggest that I endorse a counterfactual account of causation. I will be using this restricted sense of "making a difference" because it captures the sense in which many think that their prayers have the potential to not just cause, but *change* outcomes.

<sup>5</sup> Describing the problem of petitionary prayer in terms of rationality of such prayer is problematic: the requirements for rationality of the action can be met without explaining the central, confusing features petitionary prayer. Premise (4) seems to depend on the claim that the point of petitioning God through prayer is to influence what God does, and it can only be rational to do this if it's at least *possible* for petitionary prayers to achieve this end. But in general, it is a mistake to think that we can only rationally perform *A* as a means to an end if it is possible for the action to achieve that end; we may simply, mistakenly, and on the basis of excellent evidence believe that *A* is an ideal means to a desired end. For

5. So, necessarily, it is irrational/pointless to petition God for something through prayer.

There are a couple dominant responses to the Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer. The first, what I'll call the *Alternate Value Response*, argues that regardless of whether the conclusion is correct, the value of petitionary prayer (and perhaps the general rationality of engaging in it) is not derived from our influencing what God does, but is instead derived from other aspects of the prayer, such as the differences it can make in us, in our communities, and in our relationship with God.

One can read Eleanor Stump (1979), Murray and Meyers (1994), and Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010) as having all presented versions of this response. For instance, Stump takes the value of petitionary prayer to derive primarily from the impact that participation in the institution can have on our relationship with God. Stump notes that joint projects are important in friendships, especially when there is a significantly unequal distribution of power between friends. Petitionary prayer allows us to be active participants in God's projects. Murray and Meyers (following Aquinas and Calvin) claim that petitionary prayer is primarily valuable because of the differences it makes in us and our communities: it helps us counteract our tendency to see ourselves as self-sufficient, and helps us give thanks to the actual source of the goods we receive. It also helps increase our awareness of God's will and of the needs of others. And Dan and Frances Howard-Snyder note that petitionary prayers may make God's actions more valuable than they otherwise would have been, even when they don't change which actions God performs, in virtue of the fact that "bringing about a state of affairs in response to a petition can be better than the alternatives."<sup>6</sup> They give the analogous example of a mother buying a book for her son: even if it would already be best for her to buy the book, it could be *even better* if she did it in response to a petition. Likewise, the value of the state of affairs of God performing the action can be higher when it's performed in response to a petitionary prayer.

There is a problem with this response, however: merely being neutral with respect to (or even accepting) the conclusion that petitionary prayer cannot make a difference to what God does seems at odds with the strong and widespread view that one of the central features of petitionary prayer is its ability to influence God's actions. The Alternate Value Response does not seem to adequately vindicate widespread views about petitionary prayer endorsed by the people most invested in it. The desire to present a view more reflective of these attitudes about petitionary prayer may lead us instead to what I'll call the *Difference Making Response*.

Endorsing the Difference Making Response will involve rejecting one of the two premises in the Logical Problem argument in order to claim that petitionary prayers can make a difference in what God does. To respond to the Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer in this way, we need only show how, in some possible world, one

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Footnote 5 continued

instance, suppose someone petitions God for things because they have been told by the world's religious leaders that this can influence what God does (and that God desires us to have such influence).

<sup>6</sup> Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010), p. 47.

could rationally petition God through prayer, holding fixed God's essential features. We do not need to explain anything about actual petitionary prayer, we merely need to show that, in principle, it's possible to influence God through petition.

Flint (1998), Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010), Parker and Bradley (Forthcoming), and Choi (2014) have all endorsed the Difference Making Response. Isaac Choi rejects premise (2) above, and denies that God always does what's best. He argues that, in order to allow our free actions to bring about the best of all possible outcomes, God sometimes refrains from doing what will, from His actions alone, bring about what would be best no matter what we do. Parker and Rettler instead reject premise (1), noting that if different worlds can tie for best, our prayers can influence God in which of those worlds He creates.

More commonly, proponents of the Difference Making Response reject premise (1) by noting that our prayers can change the circumstances in which God acts. Flint and the Howard-Snyders argue that the very act of our praying can change what it is best<sup>7</sup> for God to do, and thus (under the assumption that God will always do what is best) change what God does. For instance, Flint<sup>8</sup> gives the example of a subject asking God for forgiveness. Prior to the petition, it may be clearly worse for God to forgive; perhaps the subject doesn't deserve forgiveness, or isn't yet in a position to be forgiven. But asking for forgiveness changes the situation, making it clearly best (at least in some cases) for God to forgive. Our petitions can change the circumstances, and so change what is best for God to do, and so cause God to act in ways different from how He would have acted otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

I believe the Difference Making Response successfully establishes that difference-making petitionary prayer is logically compatible with God's necessary existence and essential features. However, our work in explaining what is going on with petitionary prayer is not finished.

## The experiential problem of petitionary prayer

Even if we are satisfied that the Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer has been solved, we may be worried about actual instances of petitionary prayer, and the constraints that our widespread expectations regarding them put on the rationality or importance of those prayers. That is: rather than merely trying to find some possible case where a petitionary prayer can change what God does, we may want to explain how petitionary prayers might *actually* do so, while having the sort of efficacy many

<sup>7</sup> 'Best' is ambiguous between *most valuable* and *what one has most reason for*. Please adopt the reading of 'best' that you prefer. When I talk of 'increasing value of an alternative', you may read that as 'increasing reasons for bringing about an alternative'. I do not intend to suggest that any of the responses I will discuss depend on consequentialist or deontological Ethics.

<sup>8</sup> 1998, pp. 212–213.

<sup>9</sup> For an even more straightforward example of our prayers changing the circumstances in which God acts to allow God to perform the petitioned-for action while still doing what's best, consider someone who asks God to hear them. They start their prayer with the petition, "God, hear my prayer." Obviously God would not have done this had the subject not prayed. The prayer produces a new alternative action for God.

people seem to have in mind in the range of actual cases people widely apply the expectation to. We may pose this second problem in this way:

*The Experiential Problem of Petitionary Prayer*

1. If our actual petitionary prayers can generally, systematically make a difference to what God does, in accordance with widespread expectations for this kind of prayer (such as expectations about the sorts of value brought about and the range of prayers with these effects), then either God doesn't always do what's best regardless of our prayers, or God doesn't always do what's best in light of our prayers.
2. God always does what's best regardless of our prayers, and God always does what's best in light of our prayers.
3. So, our actual petitionary prayers cannot generally, systematically make a difference to what God does, in accordance with widespread expectations for this kind of prayer.

Insofar as our motivation in attempting to solve the Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer arises from a hope to explain (and also help maintain the value and rationality of) our actual practices of petitionary prayer, we should be motivated to solve the Experiential Problem as well. If we respond to the Experiential Problem by claiming that central features of people's widespread conception of petitionary prayer are mistaken, it will be hard for us to then appeal to that same widespread conception to motivate a Difference Making response or an Alternate Value response to the Logical Problem. So in addition to showing that there is some possible case where a petitionary prayer can make a difference to what God does, our Difference Making theorist must also explain how our actual prayers can systematically do so, and with the sorts of impact on the world that they are frequently expected to have.

We can find responses to the Experiential Problem in papers defending the Difference Making Response. For instance, the Howard-Snyders have attempted to explain how our actual petitionary prayers have the potential to systematically influence God's actions, not just in making Him do otherwise than what He would've done had we not prayed, but in causing Him to do what we are requesting of Him. The explanation is that "asking others to do something can change the moral status of their doing it, all by itself, independently of any other reason we have to do it."<sup>10</sup> They give the analogous example of someone who has exactly as much reason to give a friend a ride as to not, but then becomes obligated to help once the friend requests a ride, which provides a new morally relevant reason to do so and tips the balance in favor of that action. This explanation, then, presents petitionary prayers as producing balance-tipping reasons in favor of the actions we request.

However, in order to evaluate any sort of Difference-Making Response to the Experiential Problem, we must examine the "widespread expectations for this kind of prayer" mentioned in premise (1). In the remainder of this paper I will examine

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<sup>10</sup> Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010), p. 47.

three sorts of cases that produce clear intuitions about petitionary prayer reflecting widespread views about central features of that prayer. These views will impose constraints on the sort of Difference-Making Response we can give to the Experiential Problem, and any adequate response must give the right results in each of the three cases I will present. I view it as an open question whether any response can do so.

### The puzzle of significant petitionary prayer

It is common for theists to think that, at least sometimes, people can enact significant change through the power of prayer. Not just significant change for one person or a select group, but a significant change for the world. That is to say, a significant change, *all things considered*. Consider the following case:

*Prayers for Earthquake Relief:* A church group gathers together and prays for hours for the well-being of Haitians following an earthquake. They hope that their prayers will move God to make things significantly better for the Haitians than they otherwise might have been.

This sort of petitionary prayer is quite common. In cases like these, when those offering their prayers are hoping that the world will be greatly improved as a result, it is unlikely that they are thinking merely of the extra value that comes of God doing a nice thing in response to a request rather than merely doing an unsolicited nice thing. And it is unlikely they are thinking that the well-being they're requesting for the Haitians will be granted at the cost of the well-being of others: they're looking for significant value-creation, rather than value-shifting. (To put this another way: they probably don't think that their prayer will result in the world being just about as good as it would've been if they hadn't prayed at all.) They are also not likely thinking that the primary value added to the world is focused on them; they aren't thinking that the main extra good to come of their prayer involves their closer relationship with God, or their increased sense of community, and so on. Instead, they're hoping extra value will be added to the world in the form of extra saved lives, or less post-disaster suffering. They're thinking that, in response to their prayers, God might add significant extra value to the world, and that the value will be focused on the targets of the prayers, the earthquake victims.

Cases like these are problematic for the balance-tipping picture of petitionary prayer presented by the Howard Snyders. For on that picture, it seems that God does what is requested because that action, now a response to a petitionary prayer, has just enough extra value to edge out the competing alternative actions. God is not adding significant amounts of value to the world, He is shifting how value is distributed. And the extra value that petitionary prayer is bringing about involves the relationship between the prayer-giver and prayer-receiver.

These cases also raise difficulties for the picture of petitionary prayer presented by Flint. His view allows more routine randomness in how distributions of value of alternative actions (or distributions of reasons for performing those actions) relate to the offering of prayer. This randomness allows for some instances of petitionary

prayers changing the circumstances of action in ways that allow God to bring about much more valuable outcomes than He could have otherwise. But we still lack an explanation for how our petitionary prayers might *systematically* bring about these significant increases in value for the targets of our prayers. (It seems that, with this element of randomness, our prayers could almost as easily bring about the opposite of what we desire.) Flint does suggest that the added value of knowing prayers are answered, the added value of others knowing that the prayers have been given, and so on, may explain how our prayers can systematically change the circumstances of action to allow God to act in the way we request. But this explanation suggests a value-shifting account, and the extra value that is added to the world involves the prayer-giver and –receiver (and perhaps their communities), rather than the targets of the prayers.

Of course, one may respond to my Puzzle of Significant Petitionary Prayer by simply saying that prayer does not have this kind of potential. But this will be difficult if our motivation for opting for the Difference-Making Solution in the first place is to avoid the revisionary alternative of claiming that theists are widely mistaken about central features of the nature of petitionary prayer. Just as it will not be sufficient to claim that petitionary prayer generates change merely via causing changes in us, it seems insufficient to claim that petitionary prayer’s ability to cause change stops at its ability to add small amounts of value to the world. Any picture of petitionary prayer that fails to give us a solution to the Puzzle of Significant Petitionary Prayer seems to fail to capture some of what theists take petitionary prayer to be capable of.

### The problem of inappropriate petitionary prayer

Now let us consider a second kind of difficulty for the Difference-Making Solution. The Puzzle of Significant Petitionary Prayer showed that we must work to explain how petitionary prayer can systematically be as strong as we think it is. But there is also a need to explain how difference-making petitionary prayer can avoid being *too strong*: we must explain how it has the potential to make a difference in the situations in which we think it can, while lacking the potential to be too effective. The first worry is that Difference-Making views may give the result that we have reason to produce petitionary prayers in cases where we think there is no such reason. The second worry is that the potential consequences of difference-making petitionary prayer cast the permissibility of much petitionary prayer into question. First, the objection of too much justification.

*Trivial Prayer-Giving*: I suddenly become a very enthusiastic prayer-giver. One day as I’m waiting at the bus stop, I spend that time praying, “Dear God, please allow trees to persist for the next second... Thank you! Dear God, please allow trees to persist...”.

Intuitively, even if I would not have done anything else valuable with that time, it is implausible that I have reason to produce prayers like those. But if this is right, we must be careful: we cannot produce a theory on which petitionary prayers to God are

valuable, or on which we have reason to offer them, simply in virtue of being petitionary prayers to God. Otherwise, though we will have an explanation for why we have reason to pray (or it is good to pray) in many cases in which we think this is the correct result, we will also have exactly the same reason to pray (or exactly the same sort of value from praying) in cases where we think this is not the correct result.

For a tangible example, consider again the Howard-Snyders' view on which actions performed in response to petition are more valuable (all else being equal) than those same actions being performed alone. Though this can explain some of the extra goodness the institution of petitionary prayer produces, it also seems to give the person at the bus stop reason to pray at any time, for anything that God is likely to do. This seems to be a bad result.

One may, however, resist my claim that trivial prayers are without value. They may maintain that almost any prayer to God is valuable. But I can grant this: my worry does not require that my prayer-giver has no reason to pray, but instead that she has no reason to offer trivial petitionary prayers rather than, say, merely prayers telling God about the trees at the bus stop. And that, I believe, is very intuitive. It seems we have no reason to *ask God* to allow some particular tree to persist, when we have every certainty that He will do so anyway (and when it is not something particularly central to our lives).

There are two other responses one might give here. First, one may simply reject versions of the Difference Making Solution that take petitionary prayer to be valuable (or something we have reason to do) simply in virtue of being petitionary prayer. For instance, one may endorse the Howard-Snyders' difference-making picture without this added claim about value or reasons (though they would then lose their explanation of how our prayers have the potential to systematically influence God to act as we are asking Him to, for we no longer can appeal to the extra value of acting in response to a request to produce the balance-tipping that shifts what it is best for God to do). But there is another option: proponents of a view like this one may claim that prayer only has the potential to add this sort of value in *some* cases. Work must be done, then, to explain what sets those cases apart from the rest.

## The over-responsibility problem

There is a second worry about whether the Difference-Making Solution renders petitionary prayers too powerful. This objection involves ways in which the effectiveness of petitionary prayer may give us reasons to *not* pray. This will be a worry for views on which prayers are often effective value-shifters via value-addition. Consider:

*Value-Shifting Prayer:* I pray for my student to be cured of cancer, and this prayer is answered due to the prayer tipping the balance in favor of this option (or even: by adding a significant amount of value, though it is still just a small fraction of the disvalue of the cancer). The majority of the disvalue that my

student would have suffered, then, will end up elsewhere. God grants my prayer by making it so that my student is included in the research group for a new drug, and another relevantly similar person who would have gotten in is left out and thereby isn't cured of his (slightly more painful) cancer.

In a case like this one, my prayer has caused a significant amount of pain to shift from one person to another. Such a prayer might appear quite questionable in cases where, e.g., it generates a special obligation that outweighs even significant differences in disvalue between the experiences of the two patients. But even in cases where I make the world a better place through prayer (because the added value of the involvement in petitionary prayer outweighs the original difference in value between the options), it seems I could have done better by simply praying for the most valuable option to begin with. Insofar as I ought to do what's best for the world, I ought to be exceptionally careful about what I pray for.

A similar worry arises if we think that acting morally can sometimes come apart from doing what is best (which was one of the claims required for endorsing the new-reasons response to my Puzzle of Significant Petitionary Prayer), and we think that our prayers can give God new moral reasons to perform some actions rather than others. In this case, we should be concerned about whether our prayers might give God reason to do something that is worse, perhaps even significantly worse, than what He otherwise would have done. For instance, consider a variant of the student/cancer case I just described, in which my student's being allowed to take part in the study (and thereby be cured of cancer) will require that someone else with significantly more painful cancer is left out. If my prayers are the only ones God receives about this group of people, He may have an extra reason to do as I've asked. And if acting morally can come apart from doing what is best, this might be a strong enough reason for him to act as I've asked. It seems at least morally questionable for me to pray for things when there's a danger of my thereby making the world a (perhaps significantly) worse place.

Finally, regardless of whether we think our prayers can influence God's actions through value-addition or reason-creation, if we think our prayers can result in value being shifted we face another worry. In the student/cancer example, I stipulated that the disvalue my student would have had to endure was shifted to someone else. In cases like that one, though we are not dramatically influencing how much value is in the world, we are stepping into the causal chain leading to the disvalue being instantiated.<sup>11</sup> Some may think that playing this kind of role is morally problematic; by stepping into a causal chain that leads to someone experiencing disvalue (or receiving less value than they otherwise would have), I am "dirtying my hands" in some respect. There may be something wrong with my causing disvalue to shift to someone I don't know, simply for the benefit of someone I do know. If we endorse a value-shifting version of the Difference-Making Solution, this is a problem.

The Difference-Making Solution has many features we would hope for in a response to the puzzle of petitionary prayer, but it faces several follow-up problems.

<sup>11</sup> A relevantly similar case can be given that involves positive value instead: Someone in church may ask that I pray for her to get a promotion. Partly as a result of my prayers, she may get the extra value instead of someone else who was an equally, or even slightly more, promising candidate.

Anyone hoping to offer a Difference-Making Solution must address the worry that petitionary prayer is too weak to make a difference it is often taken to, yet so strong that our prayers generate reasons when we think they shouldn't, and produces consequences that cast into doubt the permissibility of our generating such prayers in the first place.

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