

A Possible Worlds Solution to the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer*

RYAN MATTHEW PARKER AND BRADLEY RETTLER⁺

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If the thing he prays for doesn't happen, then that is one more proof that petitionary prayers don't work; if it does happen, he will, of course, be able to see some of the physical causes which led up to it, and 'therefore it would have happened anyway', and thus a granted prayer becomes just as good a proof as a denied one that prayers are ineffective. – CS Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

I Introduction

There is a familiar puzzle in the philosophy of religion regarding petitionary prayer.¹ Start by assuming the traditional divine attributes – omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. Then ask what kind of actions God performs. Presumably the very best ones he can, because of his perfect goodness. He knows which actions are the very best ones he can perform, because of his omniscience. And he can perform those actions, because of his omnipotence. Continue by assuming that we human persons lack those traditional divine attributes; we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent nor perfectly good.

But sometimes we ask God to do something. And when asking, we assume that our asking will have some effect on God's decision to perform the action. But it's hard to square that with the above. Formally:

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⁺Division of labor footnote: The main idea and the power plant illustration was Ryan's, and the possible worlds framework was Bradley's.

¹ See Aquinas (1274), Stump (1979), and Basinger (1983).

1. For any action *A*, either God ought to do *A* or God ought not to do *A*.
2. For any action *A*, if God ought to do *A*, then God knows that God ought to do *A* and God will do *A*.
3. For any action *A*, if God ought not to do *A*, then God knows that God ought not to do *A* and God will not do *A*.
4. For any action *A*, if God knows that God ought to do *A* and God will do *A*, then your asking God to do *A* has no effect on whether God does *A*.
5. For any action *A*, if God knows that God ought not to do *A* and God will not do *A*, then your asking God to do *A* has no effect on whether God does *A*.
6. Therefore, for any action *A*, your asking God to do *A* has no effect on whether God does *A*.

There are various responses in the literature. We are dissatisfied with them, and in this paper, we offer a new one.

2 The Old Responses

There are several responses that locate the worth of petitionary prayer in something other than its effectiveness in prompting God to act. One such response is that prayer is good for those who pray, to align their desires with God's, or to be more aware of God's ability to act in the world.² Another says they are good for God, because God appreciates creation asking for things.³ Another says they are good for both us and God (but mostly us), because they improve our relationship.⁴ Yet another says petitionary prayer is good because there is an implicit vow of partnership between the petitioner and God, and it is a better world when God responds to the prayers where such vows are made (more sincere or intense vows are

²See Murray and Meyers (1994) and Davison (2011).

³See Aquinas (1274) II, Q83, 2.

⁴See Stump (1979).

more likely to be recognized and rewarded by God).⁵ These may very well be true, but they do not show that prayer is effective in influencing God's actions. We hope for something stronger.

Dan and Frances Howard-Snyder give two responses that maintain the effectiveness of petitionary prayer.⁶ The first response is that sometimes it's better for God to do something in response to a request than it is for God to do the same thing on his own. They give an example of a child who likes spiders. They've purchased many spider books for the child, and are considering purchasing another one. They decide it would be better to show the child the books and give him the opportunity to take some initiative in his intellectual pursuits. Similarly, God might wait until someone asks him to do something so that he can respond to the request because it's better for the person; they recognize their need for God's help, and get more comfortable asking for it.

The second response the Howard-Snyders give is that being asked to do something can change the moral landscape. If you see me by the side of the road, you may stop to offer me a ride, or you may drive on. You're not morally obligated to stop. But once I start waving my arms and running after you, it gives you a reason to stop. There may still be countervailing reasons to you stopping, but they have to be more weighty than my request. Similarly, when we ask God to do something, that gives him reason to do it.⁷ It's a factor that he considers when deciding whether or not to do A.

We dislike the first response because either it doesn't work, or it collapses to the second response. Either doing something in response to a request changes the moral landscape, giving one a more moral reason to do something, or it doesn't. If it does, then the first response collapses to the second. If it doesn't, then God will do whatever God's going to do, regardless of the request. The action may be made better by the request, but the request won't change whether or not it is performed, and therefore will have no effect.

We dislike the second response because it will apply in too narrow a range of

⁵See Smith and Yip (2010).

⁶See Howard-Snyder (2010).

⁷Gellman (1987) advocates a similar response to the puzzle.

cases. If asking does give God a more moral reason to act, it doesn't give him *much* of one. It is difficult to imagine that a significant request for God to act has such a moral effect that he grants the request, instead of acting as he already intended to. Recall that this effect is specifically the good that comes *just from the request being granted*, not what comes from the event that is requested. Suppose someone asks God to cure her father's cancer. There are a great many goods that will accompany that removal, for her family and people outside it. Perhaps there are also some bad things – if there weren't, then presumably God would cure it. So in the scope of all those goods and evils, how much good does her asking allow for? We can't see that it would be much. So this response allows for our prayers for small things to be effective, since there isn't much good or evil on each side, but not big things. It's reasonable to pray that I find my keys quickly, or a parking spot, but not that a friend survives or that my child is healthy.

3 Our Response

We'll present our response using the heuristic of possible worlds. The problem of the effectiveness of petitionary prayer assumes that God always has to do what's best; if he didn't, then our prayers could be effective in that they dissuade God from performing the best action. The simplest way to think of this is to think that God has to actualize the best possible world. If there is more than one world that's tied for the best, God has to actualize one of them. And if there is no best world because there's an infinite chain of better worlds, God has to actualize one of the really good ones (this is purely for simplicity, and can be jettisoned and the solution recast in terms of individual actions). So, the problem has it that God has already decided which world to actualize – either the best, one of the best, or a really good one. Our asking him to do something is either a part of that world that God will choose, or not. If it is, our prayers are ineffective because he already knows the best world to choose. If our request isn't part of the best world, our prayers will be unable to keep God from choosing the best world. So much for background.

Here's our solution. Our prayers that God perform an action *A* are effective if there are two worlds that are equally good: one in which God does *A*, and one in

which God doesn't do A. When we ask God to perform A, we assume that there's some A-world that God would actualize. That's either because the best world is an A-world, because there's an A-world that's as good as any non-A-world, or because there's an A-world above the threshold of goodness for God to actualize.

In the first case, our prayers are ineffective; if the best world is an A-world, then our asking for God to perform A does nothing, because he's going to actualize that world anyway. But in the latter two, our prayers may be effective. And as long as we don't know whether the best world is an A-world, our prayers are rational, because for all we know, they'll be effective.

Consider an analogy involving a power plant operator. The operator knows that her job is to produce as much power as the plant can, which is, say, 3,500 MW per day. She is a capable operator, and will do this. But there are many ways to do produce as much power as possible. So if she needs to increase steam flow to the turbines (adjust knob A), then she knows she can (and must) raise average coolant temperature as well (adjust knob B) in order to keep producing 3,500 MW per day. If adjusting knob A by itself would cause power to dip below the plant's limit, and there are no compensating actions she can take to maintain the power level, then she won't adjust knob A. The power plant operator is analogous to God. Adjusting knob A is possible for the operator because knob B can be adjusted to maintain her objective of max power, just as God can grant our request to actualize an A-world and still maintain the objective of his creation.

If there are multiple worlds that are tied for the best, our prayers are effective. When we ask God to perform A, we are hoping that one of the worlds that's tied for the best is a world in which God performs A. But we also are thinking that there might be a world that's tied for the best in which God doesn't perform A, and we think he might be intending to actualize that world. We know that he has to actualize one of the best worlds, but if two are tied then he can pick either, then we encourage him to pick the one in which he performs A.

If there is no best world, just an infinite chain of slightly better worlds, our prayers are still effective. In this case, there presumably is a "goodness line" such that God can permissibly actualize any world above that line. When we ask God to perform A, we are hoping that one of the worlds above the line is one in which God

performs A. But, we also are thinking that there might be worlds above that line in which God doesn't perform A, and we think he might be intending to actualize one of those worlds. We know that he has to actualize a world above the line, but he can pick any of them, and we encourage him to pick one in which he performs A.

This is where our analogy is relevant. The operator can tweak the dials in a variety of ways – there are a variety of dial-setting combinations – to produce the maximum power per day. Suppose we request that the turbines be slowed 10%. In that case, we are hoping that one of the sets of dial values that will produce the maximum amount of power corresponding to those turbine values. And we know that there are sets of dial values that will produce the maximum amount of power where the turbines are faster, and we think the power plant operator might be intending to use those dial settings. We know that she has to make as much power as she can, but if faster turbine settings and slower turbine settings allow for the same amount of power, other relevant values being changed, then she can slow down the turbines in response to my request.

4 Objections and Replies

Objection: When we encourage God to pick an A-world over a non-A-world, we assume that if there is an A-world as good as any non-A-world, he will grant our request. But sometimes, it seems, we can just see that there is an A-world that's as good as any non-A-world, and we pray that God perform A, and yet God does not. So, our prayers are ineffective.

Reply 1: We have not said that all petitionary prayers are effective, or that the majority are, or that all or most prayers where the goodness of the worlds in which they're granted versus not granted are tied are effective. We're responding to an argument that petitionary prayer is never effective, because the notion is incoherent. We've given situations where prayers can be effective without inconsistency.

Reply 2: But if we wanted to say that God grants all prayers to A when an A-world is as good as any non-A-world, we would say that, contrary to the way it seems, if we pray that God perform A and he doesn't, then there is a non-A-world that's better than every A-world. That's the only reason God denies prayers.

Reply 3: But if we concede that there is an A-world that's as good as any non-A-world, and we pray that God perform A, and yet God does not, then it must be because more people prayed that God not perform A.

Objection: So sometimes God grants requests, and sometimes God denies requests. We must explain the difference between the times he grants the requests and the times he denies them. If he grants them, then he has some reason for granting them. If he denies them, then he has some reason for denying them. So he grants or denies our prayers for those reasons, and not because of our prayers. So our prayers are ineffective after all.

Reply: Sometimes God is ambivalent between world X (where he performs A) and world Y (where he performs B), because both are equally as good or could be made equally as good. But sometimes he is not, because one of the worlds is better. When God denies our prayers that he perform A, it's because he can't make any A-world as good as the best non-A-world. And he denies our prayers for that reason. When the worlds are tied, he has to just pick one. And our prayers influence which one he picks.

5 Conclusion

There is a persuasive argument that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God cannot respond to petitionary prayer, because God has already decided what to do. There are some responses to this argument, but they don't allow us to pray for important things. We have offered a response whereby all of our petitionary prayers are reasonable, as long as we think that: (i) what we're asking God to do is part of a world that God could create, (ii) there's some other world God could create such that what we're asking God to do fails to be part of that world, (iii) God might be intending to create a world in which he doesn't do what we're asking, and (iv) our asking God might cause him to actualize a world in which he does what we're asking. Our petitionary prayers can be effective if (i)-(iv) is true.

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