

Does Prayer Change Things?

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The belief that God responds to prayer is widespread. According to a recent Newsweek survey 87% of Americans said that they believe that God answers prayers. In fact, they believe so heartily in the efficacy of prayer that nearly one third of those polled said that they prayed to God more than once a day. What is even more interesting about this belief among ordinary Americans is that it has been denied by so many theologians. One might think such denials would be found only among contemporary liberal theologians who deny that miracles are possible or that God would deign to interfere in human affairs. But in fact, such denials can be found in the writings of the founding fathers of many religious traditions. Of course, these theologians do not thereby deny that prayer is important or meaningful. Instead, they argue that it is meaningful because it brings about certain internal, psychological benefits for the petitioner.

But why, one might wonder, would these traditional theologians deny the popularly held belief that petitionary prayer is efficacious, not only in the sense that it affects the heart of the petitioner, but also in the sense that it moves God to act? The reason is, in fact, quite straightforward. If God were perfectly good he would want to provide us with any good that would improve our true well-being and further would deny us anything that would detract from our well-being. Thus, if one prays for something that it would be truly good to have, a perfectly good God would have already intended to give that good thing, whether it was prayed for or not. Likewise, if the thing prayed for is not good for us, God would not give it to us regardless.

However, this argument stands in tension not only with overwhelming popular opinion, but with the claims of central texts of the major Western religious traditions—texts which resoundingly affirm the efficacy of prayer.

The argument offered in short fashion above against the efficacy of prayer is a powerful one, and unless we can find some way to circumvent it, the traditional teaching that God does answer prayer seems to run the risk of making traditional religious belief incoherent. So, our question is, can it be circumvented? I will argue that it can. In order to show this, I will begin,

in section I, by tracing out the argument against the claim that God responds to prayer with greater care. In Section II, I will look at what must be shown in order to defeat the argument. In Sections III-V I will offer a number of reasons for thinking that the argument is in fact defeated. And finally, in Section VI I will look at some global objections that can and have been raised against the reasons offered in Sections III-V.

Section I: The Argument Against the Claim that God Responds to Prayer

- 1) A perfectly good being will seek to maximize the true goods of each individual to the extent that a) doing so is possible for such a being, and b) doing so does not preclude the provision of equal or greater goods to others. (definition)

- 2) God can be said to respond to petitionary prayer if and only if God provides the petitioner with what is asked for and would not have done so otherwise. (definition)

- 3) If what is requested would be good for the petitioner, then God, being perfectly good, would provide what is asked for even without being asked, if it is logically possible for Him to do so, and if doing so does not preclude provision of equal or greater goods to others. (from 1)

- 4) If what is requested is not good for the petitioner, then a perfectly good being would not give it even though it has been asked for. (from 1)

- 5) It is never the case that God provides the petitioner with something which was asked for and which would not have been provided even without the petition. (from 3 and 4)

- 6) Thus, God does not respond to petitionary prayer. (from 2 and 5)

Section II: Strategies for Defeating the Argument

There are some troubles with the argument in section 1. The first is that it is invalid since 5) does not follow from 3) and 4). The reason is clear once we take a closer look at 4). The words “not good” in 4) either mean “bad” or “either bad or indifferent.” If the former, then 5) does not follow since it could be that some things petitioned for are, in the end, simply indifferent for the one making the petition. Such things, we might suppose, are the sorts of things that God might be willing to provide if asked, but not otherwise. Since they are “discretionary,” there is nothing in God’s goodness that requires that He give such a thing. And since they are not bad either, there is nothing in his goodness that prevents them being given. If, however, “not good” means “either bad or indifferent” then 4) is simply false because there is no reason to think that God would be obliged to provide indifferent things if not asked.

But while this is a problem, it is a minor one. Religious people believe that prayer is important not just when it comes to the insignificant “little extras.” In fact, many believe that prayer for trifling things are the very prayers God does not answer (as evidenced by the fact that a majority of respondents in the Newsweek poll do not believe that God answers prayers regarding the winning of sporting events!). Rather, religious believers usually hold that prayer is most important when it comes to the most serious events we face in life, even matters of life-and-death. Surely it cannot be true that such things are always indifferent for us. That is, religious people seem to believe that prayer is not efficacious for just the discretionary things, but that it is efficacious for the “big things” as well. And this argument, one might think, at least shows that this is false.

Thus, we might reformulate the argument so that it provides a less stunning but still troubling conclusion by changing 5) and 6) to read as follows:

5*) It is never the case that God provides the petitioner with something which a) was asked for, b) is either good for the petitioner to have or bad for the petitioner to have, and c) which would not have been provided even without the petition. (from 3 and 4)

6*) Thus, if God responds to petitionary prayer it is only in cases that concern provisions which are neither good nor bad for the petitioner. (from 2 and 5*)

However, this revised argument faces further problems. Premise 3 is supposed to follow from Premise 1. While Premise 1 is controversial in a number of respects, the problem I would like to note here is that 3) simply does not follow from 1). To see why, consider a certain good, say, relief from physical pain. Imagine that during her workout, Olympic athlete Gail Devers has a mild cramp in her leg. The coach knows that if she stopped practicing immediately, the pain would go away. But he also knows that she needs to complete this regimen in order to be in good enough shape to compete at the time trials. According to 3, if the coach is good, he is required to stop the practice since doing so will yield a good for Ms. Devers, namely, relieving the mild pain she is experiencing.

Clearly nothing about the notion of perfect goodness requires the coach to do that. In fact, we might imagine Ms. Devers being quite angry at his order to stop practicing, recognizing that relieving this bit of suffering now will likely deprive her of a very great good she wants even more than she wants relief from this momentary pain.

Premise 3 as it stands is false then since it requires that a good being will bring about goods even if doing so will preclude the possibility of outweighing goods in the future; and this claim is clearly false. Thus, the argument needs a replacement for 3) that is true and follows from 1). I suggest:

3*) If what is requested would be good for the petitioner, then God, being perfectly good, would provide what is asked for even without being asked, if a) it is logically possible for Him to do so,

and b) doing so does not preclude provision of equal or greater goods to others, *and, c) doing so does not preclude God's securing future outweighing goods for the petitioner.* (from 1)

Of course, once we replace 3) with 3*), the argument is again invalid since 5*) does not follow from 3*) and 4). What does follow from 3*) and 4) is this:

5**) It is never the case that God provides the petitioner with something which a) was asked for, b) is either good for the petitioner to have or bad for the petitioner to have, and c) would not have been provided even without the petition, unless doing so would preclude the possibility of outweighing goods in the future.

The reader who is following along up until now might wonder just what this line of response to the argument in section I means for petitionary prayer. The answer is this: 5**) is consistent with God's sometimes making the provision of certain goods depend on petition being made for them, in order to secure certain outweighing goods that could not have been secured if they had been provided unconditionally. Thus, the defender of the claim that God responds to prayer might hold that there are certain goods God wants to secure, goods he could only secure by making the provision of certain other goods depend on them being petitioned for. If this is right, then it would also be right to say that, in those cases, if no petition is made, it would be better for God to withhold the good in order that the outweighing good might be obtained (the outweighing good, that is, which comes from making the provision dependent on the petition).

Section III Are There Such Outweighing Goods?

One way to defeat the argument of Section II then is to show that there are outweighing goods that God can secure by making provision of certain other (lesser) goods depend on petitions,

outweighing goods which a) in fact outweigh the good of providing the thing asked for unconditionally, and b) could not have been secured in a way that entails less evil.

I think that there are such goods and that there are different goods to be secured from the different types of prayers religious believers are requested to offer. In this essay I will look at the two most common types: prayer for goods for oneself and prayers on behalf of others (I will call these “self-directed” and “other-directed prayers”, respectively).

Outweighing Goods Arising from Self-Directed Prayer

In this section I will examine three outweighing goods that arise from self-directed petitionary prayer: preservation from idolatry, coming to a greater understanding of the divine nature and purposes, and the promotion of friendship between God and the creature.

Preservation from Idolatry

In *Making Sense of It All*, Thomas Morris argues that atheism is an urban phenomenon.¹ As we have become progressively distanced from our natural sources of sustenance, we have come to view ourselves as largely self-sufficient. When the rural, eighteenth-century farmer considered his situation it was easy for him to recognize that his continued existence was due, in large measure, to forces beyond his control. Would a late frost take the potato crop? Would a drought dry up the corn? Would a flood wash out the seed? These questions led the farmer to rely on the only Being to whom he could appeal for help in these matters. It was evident to him that he was directly dependent on the Superintendent of nature for his “daily bread.” For the urbanite, whose water and gas come from a pipe, whose waste exits likewise, whose food comes from the grocer, shelter from the contractor, light from the bulb, etc., it can come to seem that we are largely self-sufficient and we are dependent only “on other people and the products of their hands.”² As a result, when things go wrong (or right) we tend to look for human agents to blame (or praise). And conversely, when we are in need we tend to look to the appropriate human

benefactors for their provision. In doing so, however, we tend to put creatures in the position reserved for God as the giver of “every good, and perfect gift,” as he is described in the Christian scriptures, i.e., we are at risk of committing idolatry.³

Petitionary prayer can short-circuit this tendency by forcing the believer to realize that the goods she receives have their source beyond human agency. While her food might still come from the grocer’s hand and her drink from a tap, it is still God who brings the rain, provides the chemist with the intellect required to thwart white-fly infestations, and gives the physical strength to the assembly-line worker who constructs the tractors which harvest the wheat. With each petition, the believer is made aware that she is directly dependent on God for her provisions in life.

One might object at this point that while this is surely a good that might result from the practice of petitionary prayer, it is just another internal psychological benefit, one that can be secured whether prayer is ever efficacious or not. What seems to be important in this case is just that we come to recognize God as the ultimate source of all goods that we enjoy, and in coming to recognize it we see him and ourselves in our rightful place in the universe. None of this presupposes that prayer is actually efficacious.

The point of this section, however, is that making provision of certain goods truly dependent on petitioning is what allows many, and maybe all, to “recognize God as the source of all goods we enjoy” in the first place. My son, who likes to play with action figures, provides an helpful example. If I were simply to shower him with new figures regularly and indiscriminately, I can imagine him becoming spoiled and presumptuous. Thus, I often do not give him any new figures until he asks for them. And even then I might sometimes refuse for other reasons. Still, by making his having the figures dependent on his asking for them, and further by making the granting of the request something less than automatic, he not only has a genuine appreciation for the opportunity to play with them, he has a genuine appreciation for the fact that *I provided it for him*. While it could happen that he would have such an appreciation even if he were to receive the

toy without asking, it is common for such appreciation to wear thin and become downright hollow unless the economy of provision is of the sort I have described.

As a result, it seems reasonable to suppose that God might likewise make the provision of at least some goods depend directly upon our making petition for them. Not only does doing this preserve us from idolatry by forcing us to recognize that God is the ultimate source of all the goods we enjoy, it further, as the example of my son illustrates, fosters in us a genuine appreciation for the provisions that are made.

Promotion of Divine Friendship

Eleonore Stump has described a second sort of good that is secured by making provision sometimes depend on petition.⁴ In general, she argues that petitionary prayer is a hedge against the dangers of a “bad friendship” between God and His creatures. Throughout Christian Scriptures there are passages that describe the type of loving relationship that ideally exists between God and humans. Images of bride and groom, parent and child, friend, and so on are regularly employed to emphasize different facets of this relationship. Stump's contention is that in any relationship or friendship between two persons, one of whom is perfect and powerful and the other of whom is neither, there are certain dangers which can preclude friendship. She highlights two. The first is the danger of God “overwhelming” the creature. When the balance of power and abilities is so vastly uneven, the weaker member of the pair has a marked tendency to become a pale shadow of the stronger member, losing all sense of individual personality and personal strength. Stump argues that efficacious petitionary prayer guards against this potential to overwhelm because it precludes God from providing for needs that are not understood or even felt. If God refrains from making provision except in response to prayer, it allows Him, in turn, to refrain from imposing His, potentially, unwanted designs upon His creatures.

As an example, Stump describes a teacher who notices one of her students procrastinating on a term paper and thereby “storing up trouble for himself.”⁵ If the teacher were to call the

student at home and present him with the scheduling help he needs, Stump believes that his justified response might be, “Who asked you?” or, “Mind your own business.” However, if the student were to ask for help, the teacher could provide the student with needed instruction without the danger of overwhelming him. Similarly, if humans were led to docile acceptance of God’s unrequested provision, it would infringe on their autonomy. Only if believers ask for those things they are given can the necessary conditions for true friendship between God and His human creatures be met.

Stump describes the second potential harm to the divine–human relationship as that of becoming “spoiled.” The advantages of a friendship with a perfect Being, she argues, are likely to cause the weaker member to become willful and indulgent. Prayer helps safeguard against spoiling in that the petitioner is forced to acknowledge her need, and to further acknowledge a dependence on God for fulfillment of that need. In addition, if that prayer is answered, the petitioner must in turn be grateful to God for His grace. This helps avoid the kinds of human pride and indulgence that might occur if God was to make provisions for us without petitionary prayer.⁶

In a similar vein, Vincent Brümmer notes that if God did not, at least in some cases, make provision for our needs dependent on our requests, the relationship would become “depersonalized.” He argues that if God provided for all of our needs automatically we would be akin to the potted plant on the kitchen window sill which is watered when and only when our caretakers decide to water us. But just as we cannot have a personal relationship with an entity of this sort, God would be cut off from a personal relationship with His creatures without efficacious petitionary prayer.⁷

Understanding the Divine Nature and Purposes

The Hebrew Scriptures contain a widely-known story in which the prophet Elijah faces off against the prophets of the Canaanite deity, Baal, on Mt. Carmel. Both Elijah and the prophets

of Baal were to prepare sacrifices and call upon their respective deities to consume the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal spent hours engaging in a variety of religious rituals attempting to cajole Baal into intervening. When they had finished, to no avail, Elijah stepped up, prayed that God make his power evident to those who were there, and God immediately sent fire from the heavens to consume the sacrifice.⁸

This is, of course, not the ordinary mode of discourse one finds in the relationship between God and his creatures. But it points to a centrally important good that can arise from efficacious petitionary prayer. One result of God's miraculous display on Mt. Carmel is that those who witnessed it immediately acknowledge "Jehovah" as the true God. And it was not, of course, simply the miraculous display that brought about their change of heart, it was the fact that the display came in response to Elijah's petition. Seeing God respond affirmatively to Elijah's petition was, one might say, instructive.

We can generalize on this example, seeing that God could teach us a number of things about his own good nature and purposes in the world by responding one way or the other to our petitions. In doing so, God can teach his creatures in much the way that parents teach children when they honor or fail to honor their requests. When my children ask for chocolate bars for breakfast and I deny the request, I hope to teach them something about eating well and maintaining their health. When I deny my children's requests to forego doing their homework, I hope to show them something about the importance of learning and meeting your obligations. And so on.

Of course, there are some serious obstacles to be overcome in trying to apply this analogy to the relationship between God and his creatures. When I pray for rain for my vegetable garden and no rain is forthcoming, should I conclude that God wants me to cut back on vegetables in my diet, or that I am spending too much time in my garden? Maybe God didn't send the rain because were he to do so some tragic result would occur which I am completely unaware of. It seems that this ambiguity is going to infect and thus undermine any opportunity I might have to

learn something about God's nature and purposes on the basis of his responses to petitionary prayers.

There are surely limits to the sorts of things that God can teach his creatures through responses to petitionary prayers alone. Few would deny that those on Mt. Carmel drew the correct conclusion. Of course, it is rare that a request and a response are given in circumstances that lead to such unambiguous conclusions.

Yet, many religious believers are quite convinced that they do learn about God's nature and purposes from seeing God respond to prayer. In most cases where this is so, however, the believer usually claims that God made it clear that the provision or the lack thereof was indicative of some important truth about God's nature or purposes. We see a representative case of this in St. Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. In the letter Paul tells the church that he petitioned God three times to take away a particular infirmity. God revealed to Paul that he refused to grant the request in order to make it clear to others that his success was not due to Paul's efforts and abilities alone.

Of course, many religious believers claim that God similarly teaches them in such circumstances though often by means less overt than booming audible voices. Instead, they claim, God enlightens the mind of the petitioner to make certain features of the world salient (features related to the provision or failure thereof), and to see the reasons for the provision or its failure.

As in the "idolatry" account given above, one could argue that the relevant benefit here could be secured without efficacious petitionary prayer. If God can "enlighten" the mind to teach a person why a prayer was granted or not, God can simply enlighten the persons mind to teach them the relevant truth about God's nature or purposes alone. Of course, God could simply insert occurrent beliefs in my mind, but it is no surprise that truths learned by experience are more vivid, effective, and deeply rooted for us. There are some lessons that simply cannot be taught in an enduring way by sanitized didacticism. Instead it takes, for example, getting or failing to get something we desperately wanted for such truths to take hold. And so while a similar outcome

might be secured without making provisions dependent on petitions, a much greater good can be secured by God allowing such a dependence relation to obtain.

Section IV: The Problem of Other-Directed Prayer

Up until now, our focus has been on self-directed petitions. But the major Western theistic traditions are united by the fact that they advocate other-directed prayer is well. The Christian Scriptures repeatedly state that this is just what is required of believers. In Paul's letters, for example, we find him not only giving explicit teaching about the efficacy of corporate prayer but also recruiting the prayers of his audience. To the Colossians he writes, "at the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ..." (Colossians 4:3), and to the church at Corinth: "On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers." (II Cor. 1:10-11). The implication of the practice is, of course, that more people petitioning for a particular outcome makes it more likely that it will be granted.

If self-directed prayer seems initially baffling, the practice described here is all the more so. Why, one might wonder, would God choose to grant a request to provide a petitioner or petitioners with some good because more people pray for it? Such a practice seems to treat God as a cosmic vending machine, dispensing goods as long as the right combination of prayers is inserted.

Without reformulating the argument of Section I into an argument against other-directed prayer, one can still see what must be done to make sense of this second practice. As before, we must look for some good which arises out of the practice of other-directed prayer which outweighs both the good of God simply providing that which is requested, and the good of provision by way of mere self-directed prayer.⁹

Section V: Outweighing goods secured through other-directed prayer

Cultivation of community and inter-dependence

One reason for God to make provision of certain goods contingent upon corporate requests is that allowing his creatures to assist one another in this manner generates an interdependence among believers—one that fosters the sort of unity God demands of the Church. In Scripture, the Church is often portrayed as a body. The picture is of many parts that, while all individually useful and important, depend on one another for their effectiveness. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, “But God has combined the members of the body . . . so that there should be no division in [it], but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”(12:24-6). Paul explains that spiritual gifts are distributed among members of the Church so that they might realize God’s purpose for the Church on earth. But they are also distributed in such a way that the members of the body must rely on one another to perform their own function effectively, in the way that the parts of our own bodies do.

As a result, one of God’s purposes for the Church is that they recognize their interdependence and through this cultivate healthy mutual relationships within the community. Other-directed prayer can serve this end by leading believers to humbly share their needs and shortcomings with each other so that others might pray for them. But more than this, other-directed prayer forces believers' interdependence since God has, to some extent, made the granting of petitions contingent upon them recruiting others to pray for their needs. Unity among the members of the church is a good significant enough for God to make many of His provisions to individuals contingent upon their securing the other-directed prayers of different member of the church.

By way of analogy we might imagine a parent telling her children that in order for them to receive certain goods, they would not only have to ask for them themselves, they would further have to enjoin their siblings to ask for the goods on their behalf. No doubt, this would be an odd

practice for earthly parents to adopt. But consider what would likely result. Since the siblings would recognize the importance of making requests on each others behalf, they would, first, be moved to share their deepest needs and hopes with one another. Since the children do not know which goods depend on multiple petitions, they would be moved to share things that are most important to them. Second, since aiding a sibling requires actively making request on their behalf, good will is generated between the siblings. Seeing that my brother was willing to help me out by asking on my behalf, deepens my gratitude towards him and thus deepens our relationship. Finally, such an act deepens my brothers love for me since by acting on my behalf he thereby involves himself in the promotion of my interests.

From this analogy we can come to have a sense for how similar benefits might arise for the Church when God has made provision of some goods truly dependent on other-directed petitions being made for them.

Meeting needs of one another

But other-directed prayer not only serves to achieve the indirect benefit of fostering unity among members of the church. In addition, it serves the more direct purpose of making the community of believers aware of each other's needs so that they themselves can meet them. In this way, other-directed prayer helps believers to avoid the pitfall, described by in the epistle of James, of deserting the cold and the hungry with the mere salutation, "Be warmed and be filled" (James 2:16). When petitioners are confronted with the needs of others directly they are moved not only to intercede for them but to provide for them themselves. Thus, praying for one another develops a *pathos* among the members of the community that again disposes them towards interdependence and away from independent self-reliance.¹⁰

Of course, this too might be seen as a benefit which can be secured even if prayer is not efficacious. This is true, in so far as believers would willingly agree to share their deepest needs with one another even if prayer were not efficacious. But such an arrangement might not be

effective since those in the community of believers might be much more reluctant to share their needs with one another. By making the efficaciousness of prayer depend, at least in some cases, on other-directed petition being made, the believer has a powerful and immediate incentive to share those needs with others in the community.

Section VI: Some Further Problems for Petitionary Prayer

While Sections III-V have, I think, successfully undermined the central argument against petitionary prayer outlined in Section I, there are some lingering objections against the view of petitionary prayer I have developed here that must be addressed. We can put the first objection as follows:

The view of petitionary prayer you offer here suggests that God makes provision of certain goods directly dependent on our petitioning for them. Of course, there are plenty of people out there who never petition God for anything since, among other things, they don't even believe God exists! If provision of some goods is a necessary condition for their being provided, we should expect that those who pray to receive certain goods that those who do not pray never do. But such an expectation is clearly not met. The unbeliever and the believer alike receive their "daily bread" without regard to whether they pray or not. Thus, while the claim that petitionary prayer is efficacious might be philosophically defensible, the empirical evidence proves that it is false.

This sort of criticism rests on a number of mistakes. First, it assumes that provision of every instance of some type of good requires petition for that type of good. That is, it assumes that some good such as "daily bread", i.e., nourishment, is provided only to those who pray. And, the objection continues, since this is false, provision of nourishment does not depend on prayer.

Nothing in the view developed above, however, requires that prayer is a necessary condition for receiving every instance of a given type of good. God does not need to make

provision of every good or even of every instance of a type of good rest on petition to secure the goods mentioned above. All we can infer from the model I have offered is that there are some times when God makes provision dependent on petition, and in those particular cases, those who fail to pray will fail to receive the petition. Nothing in the empirical evidence could show us that this never happens.

In addition, even if prayer were a necessary condition for receiving certain types of goods, it might be that those who do not pray receive the good in question by piggybacking on the provision for those who do. When the rain falls on the faithful farmer's field, it does on his infidel neighbor's as well. But this provides no evidence against the efficaciousness of petitionary prayer.

There is, however, another response that one might make to this objection. The outweighing goods described above are largely goods aimed at those who are already believers in God. Idolatry prevention, promotion of friendship with God, securing unity within the community of believers, etc. are all goods aimed at those already in the believing community. As a result, one might hold that petitionary prayer is only a condition for provision of goods for believers, since it is only in their cases that having this dependence relationship will even possibly bring about the desired outweighing goods. If this view is right, then we might expect that religious believers would have even less in the way of goods since only they stand to lose out on some goods for failure to pray. The empirical evidence provided by the fat pagan then would, far from undercutting the support for efficacious petitionary prayer, actually support it!

There is a second objection, however, that has troubled critics of petitionary prayer. We can put the objection this way:

We can think of the goods God might provide for us as falling into two categories: a) basic goods which are required to insure that our long-term quality of life is not significantly diminished and b) discretionary goods which serve simply to enhance an already acceptable quality of life. While it seems reasonable to suppose that God might

sometimes withhold discretionary goods to secure the outweighing goods mentioned above, it also seems reasonable that he could *never do so when* it come to basic goods. The problem, of course, is that religions that believe in petitionary prayer usually highlight the fact that one ought to pray (even especially) for basic goods. Thus while the account given above makes sense of some types of petitionary prayer, it does not make sense of the sort advocated by most major theistic traditions.¹¹

Notice, first, that the objection raised here only gets worse if we assume that God sometimes withholds basic goods from those who are not religious believers because of their failure to pray. For, in that case, not only are the unable to have the outweighing goods mentioned above that come from making provision depend on petition, but they lose out on the good petitioned for as well—a very serious matter in the case of basic goods. As a result, let's suppose for the remainder that provision hangs on petition only for believers.

The objector here assumes that the good secured from allowing provision to depend on petition is never sufficient to outweigh the basic goods that could be lost were the person to fail to pray. Is this true? One philosopher has argued that we can see that it is true when we reflect on the analogous situation between parent and child. A parent, it is argued, would never be justified in withholding basic goods simply because they are not requested. And there is no reason to think that what is transparently true in the parent-child case does not apply equally to the case of God and his creature.¹²

There are, however, a number of problems with the parent-child analogy. First, it is a caricature to say that basic goods are withheld because the creature “fails to pray.” While it is true that this is the proximate reason, the ultimate reason is that the person “failed to pray in a situation in which there was an outweighing good that could be secured only if the provision was made in response to a petition.” Thus, the failure to receive the basic good would be due to the fact that an outweighing good would be secured by not making the provision.

Second, is it clear that a parent is never justified in withholding basic goods under such circumstances? Maybe it is true that the parent is never justified in withholding every instance of a type of basic good, e.g., every instance of nourishment, but it is not at all clear that the same is true for some instances of a basic good, e.g., one meal. And since, as we argued above, the view I develop here does not require God to make every instance of a type of good dependent on provision, the criticism seems to fail.

Some, however, might not be satisfied with these responses. There is something, the critic might persist, about this view that seems to make God into a utilitarian accountant, weighing up the goods of provision and the outweighing goods to be had from not providing. And while this may be acceptable in some contexts, it just seems that anyone who would withhold basic goods as defined here just does not love the person needing the basic good.

I think this objector has not appreciated the force of the above replies. As a result, let me add one more. There are two disanalogies in the parent-child relationship that makes it clear why it is not a fitting analog for the relationship between God and his creature in this case. The first disanalogy is that parents who choose to make provision depend on petition do not know whether they will be petitioned or not. But God, if he has middle knowledge, as I suppose he does, can know prior to creating any world whether or not a policy of making provision (of even basic goods) hang on petition will have significantly bad consequences. If God foresees that such a policy will result in some being denied basic provision to a severe extent, he might find creating such a world morally unacceptable. Alternatively, God might simply choose, in such a world, not to make that sort of basic provision dependent on petition.

The second disanalogy is that parents, unlike God, do not know whether or not the outweighing goods that ones seeks by making provision depend on petition will actually be realized or not if such a policy is established. Thus, a parent might institute such a policy in vain since it may turn out that, in her case, setting up such a dependence relationship yields only bitterness in the child. God, on the other hand, who can know perfectly just what results will arise from such a policy, can make provision depend on petition selectively and thereby ensure that the

outweighing goods are largely (if not completely) secured by such a policy. Thus, if the parents had perfect middle knowledge, and knew perfectly if and when the child would refuse to request provision, and further knew just what outweighing goods would be secured by establishing such a policy, it is clear that the parent would be justified in setting up such a dependence between provision and petition.

Section VII: Conclusion

The practice of petitionary prayer and the belief in its efficacy is deeply rooted in the major Western theistic traditions. A number of philosophical arguments have been raised against such a practice, the most powerful of which I have discussed here. While it may seem that there are no reasons that God would make provision depend on petition, we have seen that in fact there are a number of outweighing goods that can be secured through God's establishing such a dependence. Further, we have seen that the most serious potential problems that can arise from establishing such a dependence can be mitigated if we assume that God has middle knowledge.

¹*Making Sense of It All*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992.

²James 1:17.

³James 1: 17.

⁴Stump, Eleonore, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (April 1979), 81-91.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.87.

⁶This part of Stump's argument points to a good which is quite similar to the good that we think occurs when idolatry is avoided. In both cases, the petitioner is reminded that his needs are ultimately fulfilled through God, and not himself.

⁷ *What Are We Doing When We Pray*, Vincent Brümmer, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1984, p. 47.

⁸I Kings 18:16-39

⁹Of course, in some cases, petitions might be made on behalf of someone who is not praying on their own behalf.

In such cases, the second disjunct here is irrelevant.

¹⁰A similar idea is advanced by George A. Buttrick in *Prayer*, New York: Abington- Cokesbury Press, 1942 and also by Brümmer, pp. 57-8.

¹¹David Basinger raises a criticism very much like this one in his “Petitionary Prayer: A Response to Murray and Meyers,” *Religious Studies*, volume 31, p. 481-84

¹²See *Ibid.*, p. 483.