

ON THE PUZZLE OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

Response to Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder

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1. As I have indicated elsewhere, I am skeptical about petitionary prayer. Among traditional theistic scriptures, the Christian ones say the most about petitionary prayers, but it seems to me that even those scriptures do not imply that God will answer any of my prayers. I also suspect that God's freedom and goodness make it impossible for God's actions to count as answers to petitionary prayers. Finally, I don't think we can know whether God has answered particular prayers, and I don't know what to ask for.¹

By contrast, the Howard-Snyders defend the rationality of the practice of petitionary prayer through a series of clever and thoughtful arguments. They say that God has good reasons to decree what they call an "institution of petitionary prayer" by deciding that some things will occur if and only if people pray for them. If God has in fact created such an institution, then there are some good things that God will not bring about if we don't pray for them, so we'd better pray for them. But which things are they? Can we know? Should we pray only for those things? How specific and how earnest must our prayers be for those things before God will answer them? The Howard-Snyders leave unspecified these aspects of the institution. But they argue anyway that it is valuable enough for God to decree because it would extend a good thing, namely, human responsibility for one's own welfare and the welfare of others.² In order to do this, they defend Richard Swinburne and Isaac Choi against criticisms that I have developed elsewhere.

¹ Davison 2009.

² Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2(2)2010, p. 51-2.

2. Suppose that the Howard-Snyders were right that the institution of petitionary prayer would extend such responsibility. Would this show that the institution was “valuable enough” for God to decree? I don’t think so. The Howard-Snyders claim that our degree of responsibility “for the good that comes about through God’s granting our petitions might be quite substantial.”³ But responsibility is a two-edged sword: if people can deserve praise for answered prayers, then they can also deserve blame for not praying effectively. The belief that such blame might be appropriate (even if it isn’t in a particular case) can create significant heartache for many people, especially since we cannot tell whether God would have acted differently had we prayed (or prayed differently). For many people, there is a great deal of anxiety about what to ask for and even a loss of confidence in God due to unanswered prayers. Since some of the consequences of decreeing the institution of petitionary prayer would be bad for us, can we say that, on balance, it would be good for God to decree?

To make the points of this question more clear, compare the Howard-Snyder’s suggestion about God’s increasing our responsibility for ourselves and others through decreeing the institution of petitionary prayer to other ways in which God might increase such responsibility, such as by increasing our power or our knowledge. For example, I suppose that God could have given us psychic powers that enabled us to move objects at a distance without contact, or extra-sensory perceptual abilities that would have permitted us to know things at a distance without using the five senses.⁴ Would it have been better for God to give us those abilities? Well, it depends, I suppose, on a huge number of factors. I would not presume to know either way. It would certainly extend our responsibility for ourselves and others, but all by itself, this does not show that it would be a good thing, all things considered.

So even if the Howard-Snyders have successfully defended Swinburne and Choi against my criticisms, this by itself would not show that the institution is valuable enough for God to decree, all things considered. I suppose that one could claim here that God is omniscient, and since

³ “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” p. 61.

⁴ For a defense of the claim that some people actually possess such abilities, see Braude 2002 and 2003.

God decreed it, it must have been valuable enough, all things considered. But then one would need to show that God has in fact decreed this institution, and many people (including many Christian theists) would share my skepticism about the prospects for success in that venture.

3. Do the Howard-Snyders successfully answer my criticisms of Swinburne and Choi? With regard to Swinburne, my conclusion was that “it seems unlikely that one is responsible (in any substantial sense) for the results of answered prayer.”⁵ The Howard-Snyders reconstructed my argument for this conclusion as follows:

1. It is impossible for one to reasonably believe that one’s petition was granted by God.
2. If it is impossible for one to reasonably believe that one’s petition was granted by God, then one is not responsible (in any substantial sense) for the results of God’s granting it.
3. So, one is not responsible (in any substantial sense) for the results of God’s granting one’s petition.⁶

My criticism of Swinburne was actually based on two of the three of the factors that (I claimed to) determine degrees of moral responsibility, not (just) my claim that it is impossible for one to reasonably believe that one’s petition was granted by God in retrospect. I said that

[I]n general, one’s degree of responsibility for the obtaining of some state of affairs depends upon the degree to which one could foresee its obtaining, the degree to which one intended that it obtain as a result of one’s actions, and the degree to which one’s actions contributed causally to its obtaining. So cases in which one person petitions another person to act freely in specific ways over time, especially when one does not know the outcome of such petitions, are cases in which one’s responsibility for the obtaining of the state of affairs in question is dramatically diminished.⁷

My point was that in the case of petitionary prayer, one cannot foresee the result and one barely causally contributes to it (if at all). The Howard-

⁵ Davison 2009, p. 296.

⁶ “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” p. 53.

⁷ Davison 2009, p. 296.

Snyders offer a three part reply to my argument, and I should like to consider each part briefly in turn.

5. The first of the three replies is the “So What?” reply:

But how does any of this imply that the institution of petitionary prayer does not extend human responsibility? We don't see how. After all, even if you are only somewhat responsible for your friend's being healed, your free petition was necessary and sufficient for it given that the institution was in place. That's responsibility enough.⁸

The claim that one's petition was “necessary and sufficient” for the healing of one's friend “given that the institution [of petitionary prayer] was in place” is intriguing. As I indicated above, the description of the institution that the Howard-Snyders give is not very detailed, so it is hard to know if this claim is true. (Does the institution include God's specific intentions to answer specific prayers? If so, is this based on middle knowledge? What exactly does the institution include?)

A more general worry with the argument here has to do with what counts as “enough” responsibility. We often talk about “the last straw,” implying that the last straw is the one that broke the camel's back. After all, given that the other straws were already in place on the camel's back, this one last straw's presence was necessary and sufficient for breaking the camel's back. In Fred Dretske's useful terminology, this last straw was a “triggering cause,” as opposed to a “structuring cause.”⁹ But this doesn't mean that the last straw contributes causally to the breaking of the camel's back more than any other straw does; they all make the same contribution (assuming that they have the same weight, of course). The contribution of the last straw is a salient one to us because it is the last straw, but we must keep this contribution in perspective.

Suppose now that we complicate the picture a little bit. Imagine that there is a long line of people, each waiting to place a single straw on the camel's back, one at a time. Suppose also that the person placing the final straw cannot foresee that it will make any difference to the camel's back. (Perhaps this person has no idea how much a pile of straw weighs,

⁸ “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” p. 53.

⁹ Dretske 1988; also see Davison 1994.

for instance, or how much straw a camel can carry.) Finally, imagine that the camel's owner, who is standing next to the camel, also has a free choice about whether or not the camel will bear the full weight of the straws placed upon it. Now we have approximated more closely (but not exactly) the complicated situation described by the Howard-Snyders as "the institution of petitionary prayer." But it is not clear in this case that the person placing the last straw upon the camel's back will have any significant responsibility for the breaking of the camel's back. After all, this person will have no more responsibility for breaking the camel's back than any of the other ten thousand or so people who laid straws on the camel's back beforehand.¹⁰ This is important because the Howard-Snyders claim that even a slight extension of our responsibility for ourselves and others is "enough," and it is not clear how much is enough, since it is not clear that the good consequences of decreeing the institution of petitionary prayer outweigh the bad ones (as noted above).

6. The second of the three replies in defense of Swinburne involves the Howard-Snyders taking issue with my epistemological claim that apart from direct revelation, it is impossible to know whether or not a given prayer has been answered – or at least one of them does this, since they disagree on this point. I have developed some new arguments to support my conclusion here, but this is not the place to introduce them, so I will let the Howard-Snyders continue to debate this question with one another. If the one who agrees with me can persuade the other one to agree with me, though, it means that the foresight condition on moral responsibility probably cannot be satisfied (apart from direct revelation, of course: for more on foresight and responsibility, see below).

7. Finally, in the third of three replies in defense of Swinburne, the Howard-Snyders suppose, for the sake of the argument, that I am right in thinking that the foresight condition cannot be met, but then argue

¹⁰ I am not assuming here that responsibility is like a pie that must be divided; I recognize that two people can be fully responsible for the same thing (as Zimmerman argues persuasively in Zimmerman 1985). My point is that all of the participants are equally responsible to the same degree, and this degree is very small because each one makes a very small causal contribution to the outcome.

that significant responsibility is still possible. They offer two arguments for this conclusion. The first involves the startling claim that the causal contribution that you might make in a case of answered petitionary prayer “won’t be significantly less than the degree to which you contribute causally in bringing about various mundane states of affairs.” They say that

This is not surprising; after all, your freely asking is necessary and sufficient for her being healed, given that the institution of petitionary prayer is in place. To be sure, you didn’t set the institution in place, but then we didn’t set in place the standing conditions that allow us to contribute causally to the way the world is. Indeed, it seems we had no greater influence on those conditions than the institution in question, in which case it seems that the degree to which your asking contributes causally to your friend’s being healed is no less than the degree to which a particular act of yours contributes causally to, say, the tennis ball’s landing a winner or the sockeye and zucchini being grilled to perfection.¹¹

Now I have no analysis of causal contribution to offer, but it seems obvious to me that the degrees of causal contribution described here are very different. Knowing whether or not something is necessary or sufficient relative to certain standing conditions will not permit us to determine, all by itself, degrees of causal contribution. The case of the last straw’s breaking the camel’s back illustrates this point.¹² Other traditional theists are quick to distance themselves from the view that petitionary prayer is effective in the same way that a magical spell might be, presumably because God is a person, God is free, and God is not obligated to answer particular prayers.¹³ But the claim that a petitionary prayer is necessary and sufficient for a result (given that the institution is in place) sound very much like what we would say about the efficacy of

¹¹ “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” p. 60.

¹² In addition, my degree of causal contribution to the particular details of the tennis ball’s landing a winner or the food’s being grilled to perfection at a given time (the “triggering causes,” as Dretske would say) depends on prior development of skills (some of the “structuring causes” at work here, as Dretske would say); also, there is no intervening free agent involved in these cases. For more on this, see below.

¹³ On this point, see Philips 1981, chapter 6, Swinburne 1998, p. 115, and Flint 1998, p. 222.

a magical spell. (Of course, from this it does not follow that a petitioner would be responsible for nothing at all in the case of an answered prayer; for more on this question, see below.)

The second argument for the conclusion that responsibility can be significant involves an appeal to an example in which a man plugs a leak at a nuclear facility, where the method used to seal the leak is notoriously unreliable. And I agree with them that in general, it is possible to be substantially responsible for something to which one makes a substantial causal contribution, even if one cannot foresee the result with much confidence. So foresight is not necessary for responsibility. But from this it does not follow that the petitioner is responsible in any substantial sense for whatever God brings about in response to petitionary prayer. To show this, we would need a sufficient condition for responsibility, and an argument for the conclusion that this sufficient condition would be satisfied in such a case. I remain skeptical about the prospects of success for such an argument. For all of these reasons, I do not find this defense of Swinburne persuasive. This completes my brief survey and response to the Howard-Snyders' three-fold reply to my criticisms of Swinburne.

8. The Howard-Snyders also defend Isaac Choi's suggestion that petitionary prayers can be acts of love for other people. (Their reply to my argument is brief, so my reply to their reply will be brief also.) They do this by describing a case in which after initially deciding not to perform a life-saving surgery for her own reasons, a doctor freely chooses to perform the surgery in response to her husband's persuasion. In this case, they say, the husband is either a cause of his wife's action (assuming causation need not necessitate) or is partly responsible for his wife's action (assuming causation does indeed necessitate). Either way, though, the husband deserves some credit for his wife's action.

I should say instead that if the wife acts freely, then the husband is responsible for a number of things, including the fact that the wife reconsiders her decision in light of his persuasion, makes a decision of some kind, etc., but the husband is not responsible for her actual decision or its subsequent effects. After all, consider a possible world that is exactly like the one described by the Howard-Snyders except that the doctor considers carefully her husband's reasons and then decides instead *not* to perform the surgery in question. In that possible world, the husband is

responsible for exactly the same things as in the original situation – after all, he performs the same actions (makes the same causal contributions with the same intentions and foresight) in both worlds.¹⁴ The differences between the worlds are due to the wife’s decision, which is up to her. I should like to say the same thing in this case that I said about the case of petitionary prayer: if God answered X’s petitionary prayer to help Y, then God would be the one responsible for the act of love that makes a difference to Y, whereas X would be responsible only for the petition (which itself might be an act of love, of course).

9. In the rest of their paper, the Howard-Snyders defend the practice of petitionary prayer against a puzzle (which they call “the puzzle of petitionary prayer”).¹⁵ They do this by advancing two claims. The first is that (1) Sometimes it would be better for God to do something in response to a request than to do it without being requested to do so. This claim is plausible, and probably dissolves the puzzle, but at best, it would explain the rationality of petitionary prayer only when this would be true. Should we pray only in cases that appear to be like this? That doesn’t seem right, especially since we don’t know whether particular cases are like this.

For example, should I ask God to heal SS, the mother of five young children in my parish who has brain cancer? I guess so – it seems like it would be good – but I’m not sure. I don’t know why God would allow her to get brain cancer in the first place. Maybe there’s something else going on here, something I don’t see, maybe something that has nothing to do with me or with SS. (See the book of Job.) Would it be better for God to heal SS in response to someone’s request than to do it without having been asked? I don’t know; I can’t tell; it depends on the details.

Perhaps (1) suggests that I have something like a Pascalian wager-type reason to pray: for all I know, SS’s healing might hinge on my prayer, so I should pray – the possible payoff justifies the small cost. (Something like this actually does motivate me to pray occasionally, when I’m desperate. We seem to ask for help only when we have no other live options; nobody asks God to pass the salt.) But this reasoning would lead me to pray all

¹⁴ For more on this kind of argument, see Davison 1999.

¹⁵ “The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” p. 45.

the time for every important thing for everyone, and that's too much; I have other things I need to do. (Someone might say, "Trust in God – He would not require so much;" I would reply: "Yes, trust in God – He would not require petitions at all.") This pragmatic reason for praying also seems incompatible with the idea that one must pray earnestly in faith, but I cannot pursue that idea here.

10. The second claim advanced by the Howard-Snyders to defuse the puzzle is based on Geoffrey Cupit's arguments. It is this: (2) Sometimes requests create new obligations in God, which can tip the scales of God's reasons in favor of doing what is requested. I find this claim to be implausible. Cupit claims that requests generate new obligations which are independent of the requestee's existing reasons for doing something. But contrary to what Cupit's account would predict, petitionary prayers typically try to highlight God's existing reasons for acting. Very rarely do people seem to think that they can create a new obligation for God simply by asking, and when they do, we are very suspicious of them. (Think of televangelists who promise to bring our requests directly to God, for a small fee.) I think that's because we feel that God is not obligated to us in the way that other humans are.

Cupit may be right that we have defeasible obligations to regard requests from other humans as reasons to act, but these are often defeated. Imagine that a young child asks a competent scientist to do something entertaining with an expensive and powerful piece of equipment instead of finishing an important experiment. We would expect the scientist to treat the child with respect, but not to consider seriously the request, since there is too much at stake and the scientist already knows what is best to do in this situation. If the divine/human situation is like this one, and I suspect that it is, then I doubt that our prayers, via Cupit's mechanism, could generate any new obligations for God, especially where serious things are at stake.

Suppose that I am wrong about Cupit. Still, even if the Howard-Snyders are right about requests creating divine obligations, this will help to explain the rationality of offering petitionary prayers only in cases in which God's reasons for doing something were roughly equal to God's reasons for not doing it. But how often does that occur? (Is SS's case like this?) I have no idea. Cupit says that the obligation created by a request is

defeated if the request is for a bad thing; perhaps my petitionary prayers are all defeated in this way. I have no way of knowing if this is so. Once again, my only reason for praying seems to be a wager, and it's not a very strong one.

11. At one point, the Howard-Snyders consider the idea that we could receive all of the benefits of the institution of petitionary prayer if we simply believed, falsely, that it was in place. They reject this idea by criticizing two possible ways in which it might be true. But they do not consider the possibility that some people misinterpreted particular events long ago, sincerely believed in answered prayer on that basis, and passed along this false belief innocently to others over many years. Belief in the institution would be reinforced by the "self-serving bias," an apparently robust psychological tendency to attribute good things to one's own efforts, even if such attribution is not deserved. It would also give people a sense of control when all of their normal resources failed. As far as I can tell, this explanation of the belief in the institution of petitionary prayer might well be the correct one.

In the end, I don't think that the Howard-Snyders have provided a very strong rationale for engaging in the practice of petitionary prayer, especially in light of other puzzles that they do not address here. But as I said at the beginning, I was already skeptical about petitionary prayer from the start. Still, I always find the Howard-Snyders's work to be provocative, insightful, and helpful, so I will always look forward to the work that they do in this area.

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