

ANSWER TO OUR PRAYERS: THE UNSOLVED BUT SOLVABLE PROBLEM OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

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There is a concern about the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. If I pray for something good, wouldn't God give it to me anyway? And if I pray for something bad, won't God refrain from giving it to me even though I've asked? This problem has received significant attention. The typical solutions suggest that the prayer itself can alter whether something is good or bad. I will argue that this is insufficient to fully address the problem, but also that the problem requires another assumption which can be doubted, thereby opening up a new way to solve the problem.

Petitionary prayer has a problem: it seems as though it is useless. Suppose I ask God for something in prayer. If that thing would overall be bad, a benevolent God would not grant my petition. If the thing would overall be good, a benevolent God would provide it whether I asked for it or not. In either case, the prayer itself is pointless. This argument gives us philosophical reasons to doubt whether petitionary prayer could ever work.¹

The argument, of course, needs to be spelled out in much more detail. But since Eleonore Stump raised a version of it in her "Petitionary Prayer," efforts have been made to solve the problem. In this paper I have two aims. Firstly, I want to show that the typically offered solutions are not enough. Although they solve the initial form of the problem, they do so in a way that naturally leads to a revised version of the problem. The sorts of reasons that are usually given to support the effectiveness of petitionary prayer are structurally incapable of addressing this second problem. The problem is therefore largely unsolved. Secondly, I want to indicate that a different premise of the argument that is suppressed in the normal formulations should be doubted. Attempts to respond to the problem of petitionary prayer should instead focus on this premise (and, in particular, on discussion of it in the problem of evil literature). The problem

¹There are other philosophical arguments against the coherence of petitionary prayer. Some are also metaphysical in nature, for instance those drawing on God's knowledge of the future, and some epistemological, for instance questioning whether we could ever know a prayer had been successful. See Davison "Petitionary Prayer" (2009 and 2014) for introductions to these other problems.



is therefore solvable. In this way, I hope to clarify the problem and the appropriate means of addressing it.

So, the plan for the paper is as follows: I first, in Sect. 1, give the canonical problem of petitionary prayer. In Sect. 2 I argue that, while the current replies to the problem are able to address the canonical problem, they give rise to a reformulation of the problem that is still damaging. In Sect. 3, I investigate a key and suspect premise shared by both versions and align the problem with the problem of evil. Finally, I conclude in Sect. 4.

I. The Problem of Petitionary Prayer

The problem of petitionary prayer I am considering is a problem about the effectiveness of such prayer given the nature of God. It is important to note that the type of prayer I'm interested in is *petitionary*, in the sense that it asks God for something. It is therefore contrasted with, say, contemplative or thanksgiving prayer. What is it for a prayer to be effective depends on what type of prayer it is. Effective contemplative prayer may bring about certain fruits in the one who prays: this might be what constitutes successful contemplative prayer. Other forms of prayer will have other conditions for success.

What is it for a petitionary prayer to be effective? One simple thing we can say is that for a petitionary prayer to be effective it must have some effect. But this isn't enough.² What we really mean, I take it, when asking whether a petitionary prayer is effective is not whether it has any effect whatsoever but whether it has the *intended* effect (or something approximating it). To put it another way, what we mean by effective petitionary prayer is successful petitionary prayer: prayer which is effective for a particular outcome. We ask God for something, and our asking has an effect on the thing we ask for. Our question, then, is the following: what is it for a petitionary prayer to be effective for a particular outcome? Or, in other words, what is it for a petitionary prayer to be successful?

The answer is that petitionary prayer needs to make a difference to the outcome. This, I take it, will be universally accepted. But, of course, is not yet fully precise.³ It's contentious what making a difference to the outcome consists in in this context. A straightforward and generally accepted way to cash out difference-making here is in terms of *counterfactual dependence*: a prayer makes a difference to an outcome when the outcome wouldn't happen if the prayer didn't happen. This would particularly appeal to those who favour both a causal approach to the success of peti-

²Petitionary prayer is directed, so it doesn't achieve its aim if what is aimed at is not affected by the prayer. This means that petitionary prayer which has no impact on the outcome is not effective in the terms of this debate, even though it might make the world better in a number of other ways. In such a case petitionary prayer has side-benefits, and is not inappropriate to engage in, but is still strictly speaking ineffective.

³One promising initial thought is that the relationship between prayer and outcome must be causal: the prayer must be a (or the) *cause* of the outcome. Of course, exactly how to understand the causal relation is a major and open metaphysical question.

tionary prayer and a counterfactual approach to causation. The debate on the efficacy of petitionary prayer has therefore focused on the question of whether the outcome can counterfactually depend on the prayer.

Understanding difference-making in terms of counterfactual dependence has its critics.⁴ Nevertheless, in my presentation of the problem I will be taking counterfactual dependence of outcome on prayer as a necessary condition for effective petitionary prayer. This is because the cases that critics point to as counterexamples of the counterfactual dependence account of effectiveness are not typical. So it is typically the case that effective petitionary prayer does involve this counterfactual dependence. If a problem can be generated for such typical scenarios, then petitionary prayer is still in trouble.⁵ If counterfactual dependence is indeed the right way to think of effectiveness for *all* petitionary prayer, then the problem is completely general. Even if not, though, the problem is still significant.

Petitionary prayers come in different shapes and sizes. Very often, outcomes that are prayed for are prayed for by many people at many times and in many places. The contents of prayers themselves can also be broad or general (e.g., a prayer for all the sick or even for all those who are not prayed for). There are interesting questions about how different prayers are related. Is my prayer for my grandmother to recover from an illness a *part* of a prayer for all sick? Is a prayer for all the sick *partially* a prayer for my grandmother to recover? Are repeated petitions for the same outcome by the same person instances of one and the same prayer or distinct prayers? Can two people pray the same prayer? These are good questions, and would involve a metaphysics of prayer that considered the identity conditions of and mereological relations between prayers.

Without trying to settle this issue, there is a way to bracket it. For the purposes of what follows in this paper, I will consider multiple prayers for the same outcome as a single prayer. In other words, I will take individual prayers for an outcome to compose a single, complex prayer for that outcome. The individual prayers will be part of that complex prayer. When the complex prayer is effective, the individual prayers will be *partially* effective in virtue of being part of an effective prayer for that outcome. These complex prayers can be identified through the outcomes they are directed at. I will also, for simplicity, assume that general prayers (e.g., a prayer for all the sick) are complex prayers composed of simpler prayers for more specific outcomes (e.g., prayers for each individual sick person). Using this mereology of prayer, we can treat all prayers as single prayers for specific outcomes. I am aware that this mereology is an assumption,

⁴Davison "Petitionary Prayer" (2009), n3, gives a list of those supporting the condition. He and Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer," are in the minority who disagree. See especially Davison "Petitionary Prayer" (2009), 287–288 for discussion.

⁵This is accepted by those who reject the counterfactual account of difference making for petitionary prayer. See Davison "Petitionary Prayer" (2009), Sect. 4, for instance. Davison doesn't accept the condition but still recognises the problem I will shortly raise (as does Cohoe).

and there is work to do to defend it. But that is not work I intend to do here.⁶

Finally, before spelling out the problem, there is a broader question I wish to briefly address. Would it matter if petitionary prayer were ineffective in the sense I've outlined? In other words, how much of a problem would it be if prayed-for outcomes never counterfactually depend on prayers? I think it would be a serious problem if petitionary prayer were ineffective in this way. This is for two reasons. Firstly, petitionary prayer is an important part of the traditions of very many religions, and in particular of the three Abrahamic religions. It would be a serious revision of these traditions if philosophical argument led us to deny the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. Secondly, petitionary prayer is an important part of religious practice for many believers. People offer petitionary prayers, and do so because they are asking for a particular outcome. To deny that the prayer makes a difference to the outcome is to say that these people are mistaken in what they think their prayer can do.

So, although we could recover a way to make sense of petitionary prayer if it is ineffective (for instance by pointing to the alleged side-benefits of ineffective petitionary prayer, or by taking it to be disguised forms of other sorts of prayer), it would be a substantial departure from religious traditions and practice. The question of petitionary prayer's effectiveness matters.

With these preliminaries out of the way, we can turn to the problem with petitionary prayer. The problem of petitionary prayer outlined in the first paragraph undermines the idea that any prayer can be successful. For it tries to show that no outcome can counterfactually depend on a prayer. It does so in two steps. Firstly, suppose that what is prayed for is overall bad. Then, it is argued, the God of traditional theism would know this and hence not bring the outcome about despite the prayer. In such a case, the outcome doesn't counterfactually depend on the prayer because the prayer occurs but the outcome does not. Secondly, suppose that what is prayed for is overall good. Then the God of traditional theism would bring it about regardless of the prayer. For, it is argued, a benevolent God would bring about overall good things even if we didn't ask for them. Thus, because the outcome event would occur even without the prayer, the outcome does not counterfactually depend on the prayer. So in this case too, the prayer is not effective. Hence, whether the outcome occurs or not the prayer is not successful.

It will be useful to make this argument somewhat more precise. As I have sketched it, the problem is a dilemma: either the outcome is overall bad, in which case it won't occur even if prayed for, or overall good, in

⁶Thanks to Brian Leftow for highlighting this general issue, and some problem cases. I hope to investigate the metaphysics of prayer in more detail in further work.

which case it will occur whether or not it is prayed for. The problem is generally presented this way in the literature. But for clarity I will follow a more linear argument structure:

- (1) An agent *S* prays prayer *p* for outcome *e* (assumption)
- (2) *e* occurs if and only if God chooses to actualise it (assumption)
- (3) God chooses to actualise *e* if and only if *e* is overall better to occur than not (assumption)
- (4) *e* occurs if and only if *e* is overall better to occur than not (from 2, 3)
- (5) *e* being overall better to occur than not does not counterfactually depend on *p* (assumption)
- (6) *e*'s occurrence does not counterfactually depend on *p* (from 4, 5)
- (7) *p* is effective for *e* only if *e* counterfactually depends on *p* (assumption)
- (8) *p* isn't effective (from 6, 7)
- (9) If an agent *S* prays prayer *p* for outcome *e* then *p* isn't effective (from 1, 8)

Some explanation of this argument is in order. (1) is a general statement of a prayer case and is assumed for conditional proof. (2) is a claim about God's sovereignty over what the world contains. It tells us that events only occur when God chooses them. This obviously requires the existence of God and of a certain sort of God: one who has control over the obtaining of all states of affairs. Though this is an assumption many will deny, it is an assumption that is reasonable in providing an internal problem of petitionary prayer for certain religious traditions. In particular, (2) plausibly follows from the existence of the God of traditional theism.⁷ (3) claims that God chooses to bring about an event only when it is better for the world that it occurs than it does not. This is an assumption I will challenge later in the paper. But for the purposes of the argument we can see that there is some surface attraction to the claim. The God of traditional theism is all powerful, all knowing and perfectly good. Working within religious traditions that accept such a characterisation of God, it appears that God would only want events which contributed to the goodness of the world to occur. God would also know which these are and be able to ensure that just these events occur. Note that here we are talking of *overall* value—the value of the event given its place in a mosaic of other events. So an intrinsically bad event can be better to occur than not, while an intrinsically good

⁷Premise (2) rules out a view of God according to which some events are in our power, not God's, to actualise. Examples of such views include open theism and related strong versions of the free-will defence, where God's gift of freedom to us constrains God such that there are events that we alone actualise. I take these views to be non-traditional, but this is not meant in a pejorative sense.

event may fail this test (the intrinsically bad event might, for instance, be a necessary condition for some greater goods). (4) follows straightforwardly from (2) and (3).

(5) is an assumption about the relationship between e 's value and p . It is controversial and, as we shall see, is challenged by many of the defenders of petitionary prayer. It is a suppressed premise in most formulations of the problem.⁸ (6) is derived from (4) and (5); if e 's occurrence depends only on its overall value and its overall value is counterfactually independent of the prayer then the occurrence is not counterfactually dependent on the prayer. (7) states that counterfactual dependence is a necessary condition for a petitionary prayer to be effective (discussed above), and (8) tells us that p is not effective. (9) draws the conclusion of the conditional proof. Generalising: no petitionary prayer is effective.⁹

I have flagged a couple of places the argument can be challenged. The first is premise (3). The second is premise (5). Denying (a version of) premise (5) has been the most popular route to solve the problem. Although premise (5) seems to me indeed to be false, rejecting it is not enough. This is because we can reconstruct an argument which still delivers a damning conclusion while rejecting premise (5). This is what I aim to show in the next section. Later in the paper, I argue that we should also reject (3), and that this solves even the revised version of the problem.

II. Failures of Current Solutions

As noted in the previous section, the problem of petitionary prayer requires a premise, usually suppressed, that the prayer itself does not make a difference to whether the event is better to occur or not. This is premise (5) in my version of the argument. In the typical dilemma formulations, the outcome is presented as either overall good or overall bad independent of the prayer. This is where the suppressed premise operates. For the dilemma misses out a further alternative. This is that the outcome is overall bad before the prayer and overall good after the prayer, because the prayer itself alters the value of the event. In other words, prayer makes an event which was antecedently not better to occur into an event that *is*, post-prayer, better to occur than not.

A number of philosophers have noticed this problem with the argument. The dominant strategy is therefore to find ways that the value of the outcome event might be connected to its being prayed for. Examples of this approach include Murray and Meyers ("Ask and It Will be Given

⁸In dilemma formulations the assumption isn't made explicit. See, for instance, the Howard-Snyders, "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," 45. Even in Stump's original formulation this isn't brought out (see her "Petitionary Prayer," 83–84). Dialectically, this allows proponents of the typical solutions to challenge this hidden assumption. This will be discussed more in the next section.

⁹It is worth flagging that the premises of this argument, if true, are necessarily true. So a stronger conclusion is warranted, i.e., that petitionary prayer *cannot* be effective. This is pointed out by the Howard-Snyders, "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," n5.

to You”), Flint (*Divine Providence*), Swinburne (*Providence and the Problem of Evil*), the Howard-Snyders (“The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer”), Cohoe (“God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer”), Choi (“Is Petitionary Prayer Superfluous?”) and, arguably, Stump (“Petitionary Prayer”) herself. They point to different beneficial effects that answered petitionary prayer brings that will add to the overall value of the outcome’s coming about. In this part of the paper, I want to show why such attempts are insufficient by showing how a revised version of the argument which doesn’t require (5) will still undermine the practice of petitionary prayer.

To be clear, I will not argue that premise (5) is true, and that the value of an event is independent of whether it is prayed for. Indeed, I agree that prayer might make an event more valuable. So whether an event is better to occur or not might indeed counterfactually depend on a prayer for that event. This observation gives a satisfactory response to the argument as it stands. But this is not enough: there is structural problem with this reply that makes it inadequate as a response to the deeper issues involved.¹⁰

To see this, first consider what such solutions say is happening in cases of effective petitionary prayer. It will help to focus on particular examples. So, consider the defence offered by Cohoe, an exemplar of this approach. In short, his idea is that the value of some event can depend on how it is brought about. If I bring about my friend’s recovery from illness via petitionary prayer, this is better than God bringing about this recovery without my prayer (of course, God is required in either case). Thus the overall value of the recovery is increased by my praying for it.¹¹ As another example, consider the Swinburnian view. According to Swinburne, petitionary prayer extends our responsibility, and so God’s bringing about some event due to a petition has more value as an exercise of this responsibility than if God brought the event about without the petition. More schematically, the solutions propose that e has a value m if brought about without the prayer p and a value of $m + n$ if brought about with p (where n is non-zero).

Note that, for there to be counterfactual dependence between a prayer and an outcome, it must be the case that the outcome wouldn’t occur without the prayer. In other words, the values of m and n must be such

¹⁰For different reasons, Parker and Rettler, “A Possible Worlds Solution to The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer,” 180–181, argue against some of these defences of petitionary prayer (and give a separate argument against the Howard-Snyders, which I won’t consider). I confess I don’t fully follow the argument. They say, “there are several responses that locate the worth of petitionary prayer in something other than its effectiveness in prompting God to act. . . . These may very well be true, but they do not show that prayer is effective in influencing God’s actions.” The idea seems to be that, if the worth of petitionary prayer is not in its effectiveness, then the benefits are not effective. But this seems obviously false: the benefits might only be obtainable if the prayer is effective and hence the reason God brings about the outcome even if the benefits don’t *consist in* the outcome. As a parallel, I might sometimes give my son an unhealthy snack when he asks nicely in order to promote his politeness. The worth of the asking is not in my giving the snack (as it is unhealthy), but rather in promoting the politeness. Nevertheless, my son’s request is effective in influencing my action.

¹¹See Cohoe, “God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer,” Sect. IV.

that if e had value m it wouldn't occur, but if it had value $m + n$ then it would.¹² Given premise (3), this can be expressed by the claim that m is not greater than the value of not- e while $m + n$ is greater than the value of not- e . If v is the value of not- e , then the following inequalities hold:

$$m \leq v$$

$$m + n > v$$

Consider: if $m > v$ then e would have occurred even without p . So our prayer is not in fact effective in such a scenario.¹³ If $m + n \leq v$ then e won't occur even with p , and p won't be effective in such a case either. Thus the only situation in which e counterfactually depends on p is when n brings the value of $m + n$ above that of v . The effectiveness of petitionary prayer is therefore very sensitive to the values of m and n .

The typical responses therefore only allow that petitionary prayer is effective when m and n are precisely calibrated in this way. However, this allows a revised version of the argument to be constructed by simply adding these circumstances into the relevant premises:

- (1') An agent S prays prayer p for outcome e (assumption)
- (2') e occurs if and only if God chooses to actualise it (assumption)
- (3') God chooses to actualise e if and only if e is overall better to occur than not (assumption)
- (4') e occurs if and only if e is overall better to occur than not (from 2', 3')
- (5') e being overall better to occur than not counterfactually depends on p if and only if $m \leq v$ and $m + n > v$ (assumption)
- (6') e 's occurrence counterfactually depends on p if and only if $m \leq v$ and $m + n > v$ (from 4', 5')
- (7') p is effective for e only if e counterfactually depends on p (assumption)
- (8') p is effective if and only if $m \leq v$ and $m + n > v$ (from 6', 7')
- (9') If an agent S prays prayer p for outcome e then p is effective if and only if $m \leq v$ and $m + n > v$ (from 1', 8')

¹²Here and in the rest of the section I will be assuming an account of value which I will challenge in the next section. I do so because this is a view of value exhibited by the argument which is not challenged by proponents of the solutions discussed here. These solutions work within this account of value, and are therefore dialectically vulnerable to criticisms which employ it.

¹³Whether or not it would increase an event's value if we pray for it even though it is going to come about anyway will depend on the particular defence of petitionary prayer. For some of the defences, I have Swinburne's particularly in mind, if the prayer makes no difference to the coming about of the event then it doesn't add value. For such views, once m is high enough, p doesn't add n to e 's value.

Generalising, petitionary prayer is only effective when the prayer makes the value of the outcome higher than the value of its negation. So far, this might not seem like a problem. But I will now give reasons to think that (9') and its generalisation are unacceptable for the defender of petitionary prayer.

The first issue is that the values that are claimed for petitionary prayer, even considered all together, may not be particularly large by comparison to the values of the outcomes prayed for.¹⁴ So n may be comparatively small. This means that the number of cases in which petitionary prayer is actually effective may also be small, because the value added by prayer isn't very large. To emphasise this criticism, it can be pointed out that petitionary prayers seem to be most worthwhile when major tragedies or life events are concerned. We pray that friends recover from cancer, that babies are healthy, that terrorist attacks are unsuccessful, that money worries are resolved and so on. This seems quite right. But it seems less worthwhile to pray that our sports team wins, or that we find our car keys, or that a traffic jam clears. There seems to be a connection between the overall values involved in the events and the suitability of petitionary prayer. The higher the values involved, the more we should pray. But the logic of the above seems to suggest the opposite: when the value of m is lower, prayers will be comparatively more effective. So we should pray more often for the little things, and less often for the big things. This seems to turn intuition on its head.¹⁵

Perhaps, though, we can offer a reply on behalf of the standard type of defence. The values that are acquired by events in virtue of their being prayed for might be proportional to the importance of the event prayed for. For instance, taking Swinburne's proposal, the value of the responsibility we gain through effective prayer seems proportional to how valuable the outcome is. If this were so, the value of n would be proportional to the value of m and thus it would be equivalently appropriate to pray for significant events as for insignificant ones. It could even be suggested that n 's value was related to m in a scalar way, so that the increase of the value of m actually increased the proportional value of n : by raising m we would therefore raise n by a comparatively larger amount. This would recapture the intuition that it is more appropriate to pray for more important events,

¹⁴Of course, this will depend on how much value one attaches to the benefits claimed by various authors (and whether these benefits are really accrued). As Brian Leftow has pointed out to me, God might find additional values in petitionary prayer that we have not yet discovered too.

¹⁵Compare this also with the literature on horrendous evils: it seems that praying to avoid terrible things is better than praying to avoid inconveniences. But because with terrible things that would otherwise occur the values involved on both sides are so large, the prayer itself seems relatively less effective. (It might still be effective on this view, of course, if the scales are incredibly finely balanced.)

but of course would depend on the defender of the standard reply giving reasons that there is such a relationship between the values of m and n .¹⁶

However, there is a second and more serious issue with (9'). It states that, whenever a petitionary prayer is effective, e doesn't have sufficient value to occur without p . By praying, I alter the scales so that *in virtue of the prayer*, the event is now valuable enough to occur.¹⁷ In other words, p makes e of sufficient value for it to be included in the world. But this is a concern. For m is not enough for e to be worth having in the world: $m \leq v$. So the prayed-for outcome is, without the prayer, not worth occurring. This means that a prayer is only effective when what is being asked for is, without the prayer, not better to occur.

This sounds strange. According to this view the only effective prayer is prayer for an outcome when that outcome is, without the prayer, not better to happen. The proponents of the typical solutions are committed to this, because their solutions do not undermine the revised argument. Specifically, they are accepting that God will choose to actualise an event if and only if it is overall better that it occurs than not. This is why they seek to find values that prayer adds. But this means accepting that before the prayer the overall value of the prayed-for event is no higher than it not coming about.

But the prayer doesn't make the outcome intrinsically more valuable. Rather, it makes the outcome *overall* more valuable. It does so by adding some benefits to the outcome, namely the benefits of answered petitionary prayer. What the solutions do is offer difference candidates for what this external benefit might be (responsibility; the existence of creaturely power; distance required for relationships with God etc.). So on these models petitionary prayer only has a self-fulfilling benefit: prayer is effective simply because of the benefits that answered prayer has, independent of the outcomes prayed for. It must be that n drags up the overall value $m + n$ to above v : the extent to which m is below v on its own is the extent to which the tangential benefits of prayer must compensate before the prayer is effective. So while the petitioner's objectives in praying might be to bring about the outcome, the objective point of petitionary prayer, on this view, is simply to gain the benefits of effective petitionary prayer.

¹⁶Brian Leftow has suggested to me that God might be more pleased by our prayers concerning more valuable events, and that the degree to which our prayer pleases God might increase over the rate of increase in the events prayed for. If so, this might give a scalar model. As related option, a referee has suggested that Choi, "Is Petitionary Prayer Superfluous?" might be developed in this direction: if displaying faith is an important good of petitionary prayer, then praying for more significant things might embody faith to a much greater degree. Though suggestive, I set this possibility aside from now on.

¹⁷I am assuming that the act of praying does not alter the intrinsic properties of the outcome itself. Brian Leftow has pointed out to me that if the accidental properties of the outcome can be changed by being prayed for, then the value of the outcome can increase even setting aside the value contributed by the fact of my praying. Such an account would cut against my point here, but needs to be spelt out.

Not only is this circularity philosophically unsatisfying, it is wildly at odds with the actual practice of petitionary prayer. If asked, this is not what petitioners would think about their prayer. They do not, explicitly or implicitly, take themselves to be asking for some outcome which is antecedently not better to occur than not. They also would not take their prayer to only come about in virtue of the side-benefits of that very prayer. But this is what (9') tells us. If the revised argument is not rejected then the fully-informed petitioner prays for an outcome knowing that the prayer will be effective only if, objectively speaking, it isn't overall better for the outcome to come about without the prayer. While this might not be immediately irrational, it is at least a radical departure from what religious people think they are doing when they offer prayers. (9') restricts effective petitionary prayer to these strange cases, and in so doing fails to make space for the actual practice of petitionary prayer.

So, to sum up: the dominant style of response to the problem denies premise (5), that the overall value of the outcome doesn't counterfactually depend on the prayer. This is a successful response to the problem as outlined in the previous section. However, if we do no more than this petitionary prayer is left in an unacceptable position. This is because a revised version of the problem will deliver us a restriction on effective prayer which is unsustainable. Firstly, it seems that only a small number of cases of petitionary prayer can be effective. There are ways to try to address this criticism. But secondly, and more importantly, the revised argument tells us that all effective petitionary prayers must be for events that are antecedently not worth God choosing. Before the prayers, the events are not better to occur than not. With the prayer having been offered, the event which antecedently has insufficient value then occurs in order for the benefits of effective petitionary prayer to be gained. In effect, the benefits of effective petitionary prayer are themselves the positive outcome, which are compensation for allowing an event which is otherwise not good enough to obtain. Thus while there might indeed be effective prayer on this picture, the prayed-for events are themselves otherwise not valuable enough for God to choose. This is not how effective petitionary prayer is supposed to look.

I thus contend that all responses to the problem of petitionary prayer that rely only on a rejection of (5) are incomplete. They do not address the revised problem and are thereby committed to a damaging restriction on prayer. The dependence of the value of some event on its being prayed for is not, on its own, sufficient to provide support for the practice of petitionary prayer. The issue with petitionary prayer is deeper than simply finding some mechanism by which prayer can alter the value of a prayed-for event. Fortunately, however, I believe there is indeed a way to answer this deeper problem.

III. An Attack on Premise (3)

The argument that petitionary prayer is ineffective has been shown to be worrying. In particular, the standard response cannot handle a revised version of the problem. In this section, I wish to offer a different reply which is able to answer both the canonical and the revised version of the problem.

In short, this reply is to deny premise (3), which is identical in both problems (labelled (3') in the revised version). As a reminder, this premise is:

- (3) God chooses to actualise e if and only if e is overall better to occur than not

The reasoning behind the premise is that the God of traditional theism will, because of the divine attributes, choose an event only if it contributes positively to the value of the world. As mentioned earlier, this inference has some surface plausibility. For why wouldn't a good God choose in this way? It seems strange for God to choose to actualise events which aren't overall better to occur than not. But I will suggest that reflection on the notion(s) of value at work in this assumption give us strong reasons to reject the premise. Because this premise is common to both the canonical and the revised arguments, rejecting it is sufficient for solving both versions of the problem.

The first thing to flag in assessing premise (3) is that it is in the spirit of the stronger claim that God creates the best possible world. A generalised form of (3) asserts that all and only the events which are overall better to occur than not are actualised. Being overall better to occur than not is plausibly construed as a matter of being better than any incompatible alternative. If so, then all and only the *best* events will occur. Given that we are considering *overall* best events, composing these leads to the best possible world.

This is a problem for premise (3). Although the claim that God creates the best possible world would appeal to those with a Leibnizian frame of mind, it has also been widely criticised. In particular, it isn't clear that there *is* a best possible world: there might be more than one of the maximum value, or there might be an infinite series of worlds of increasing value with no maximum.¹⁸ In the literature on petitionary prayer, there is some care to avoid a commitment to the claim that God creates the best world.¹⁹ So perhaps we should interpret (3) differently as asserting

¹⁸See Pickup, "Leibniz and the Necessity of the Best Possible World," for some discussion of the issues this raises for Leibniz. The problem in this context is that there could be a *surplus* of best possible worlds (if ties are possible) or a *shortage* of best possible worlds (if there's an infinite hierarchy). See Senor, "Defending Divine Freedom," especially section V, and Forrest, "The Problem of Evil: Two Neglected Defenses," respectively for these cases. My thanks to Chris Hughes for discussion of this, and of the next notes.

¹⁹See, for instance, Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 83–84 and Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer," 28–29.

something which allows a class of equally good best possible worlds or an infinite hierarchy of better possible worlds. For instance, we can read (3) as a claim concerning the decision-making process God enacts when faced with a binary choice to actualise or not to actualise some particular event. In such a case, God isn't required to create the best possible world but just to make it the case that every event in the world contributes positively to its overall value. God needn't consider all possible alternatives when assessing whether to actualise an event, but only whether the world containing that event is overall of higher value than an otherwise identical world without that event.

But although premise (3) therefore can be understood so as to avoid straightforwardly claiming that God creates the best possible world, this still doesn't address the worry. For a similar issue can be reconstructed. Suppose God faces the choice whether to actualise or not to actualise some event *e*. (3) tells us that God will actualise *e* if and only if it is overall better to happen than not. This requires comparing scenarios in which *e* occurs to all scenarios in which *e* does not. To put it another way, this involves a comparison between worlds containing *e* and worlds that do not contain *e* which share the actual world's history up to the moment of the choice. It seems that arguments in favour of an infinite hierarchy of better worlds would carry over to provide reasons to think there can be an infinite hierarchy of better worlds which share the history of the actual world up to that point. Similarly, arguments in favour of ties between best possible worlds in general seem to carry over to cases where worlds share histories up to the relevant point. This leaves God unable to actualise any events on the basis of (3), for there is none such that it is overall better that it occurs than not. (3) leaves God's choice of worlds underdetermined.

To give a concrete case: suppose there are two possible worlds of equal value, and in one *e* occurs while in the other *f* occurs, where *e* and *f* are incompatible. Suppose also that *e* and *f* both satisfy the interpretation of (3) we are offering: the world containing neither *e* nor *f* is worse than the worlds containing each of them. It seems that (3) predicts God should actualise both *e* and *f*. But *e* and *f* are incompatible, so God cannot.

The sort of scenario has been used to provide a direct defence of the effectiveness of petitionary prayer: Parker and Rettler argue that prayer is effective precisely when there are two worlds of equal value such that one contains the outcome and the other does not.²⁰ The prayer, then, nudges

²⁰To be precise, they also countenance prayer when two worlds are both above a threshold for creation but one contains an event and the other doesn't. This complicates the criticism of their view that I present in the next paragraph of the main text, but doesn't avoid it. For if two worlds are both above the threshold and one contains *e* while the other does not, why should we want the world containing *e* to obtain? If the answer is that the world containing *e* has a higher value, then we are back in the original problem. If the answer is that *e* is somehow favoured once prayed for even though it doesn't add value then it violates (3) without giving a reason to doubt (3). I do think we should doubt (3), and so this is along the right lines. But once we deny (3), we don't need the full machinery of their solution. See my discussion of satisfying below.

God to choose one event (and hence world) over the other. This sort of defence of petitionary prayer can accept premise (5), as the value of an event does not counterfactually depend on its being prayed for, but nevertheless show how the occurrence of that event does counterfactually depend on the prayer. According to Parker and Rettler, this is how a prayer can be effective. Thus it seems that (3) is false and shouldn't be accepted. The argument seems defeated.

This, however, is a bit fast. Although the scenario discussed is indeed a counterexample to (3), it is not enough to save petitionary prayer from trouble. For much the same issues I raised for the typical responses to the problem can be also be applied to Parker and Rettler's response. A revised argument can be constructed which leaves us with the conclusion that prayer is effective if and only if the values of e and f are identical (i.e., $m = v$). This is an even stricter restriction than (9'), because (9') required that the overall value of e is less than or equal to f when considered without the prayer, while Parker and Rettler only allow it to be exactly equal to f . This stricter restriction is at least as unsatisfying. In the first instance, there will be a vanishingly small number of cases where petitionary prayer is actually effective. For the scales of value need to be so precisely calibrated that there is no difference at all between the overall values e and f , and thereby between a world in which e occurs and one in which it does not. So very few petitionary prayers will be able to be successful.²¹ This might save the coherence of petitionary prayer, but at the cost of a defence of its worth in practice. More importantly, though, the second criticism above also stands. Prayer is only effective when the prayed-for outcome has exactly zero overall value. God will only answer a prayer when that prayer makes no difference to the overall value of the world. This is certainly not what petitioners would think about their prayer, nor does it give a philosophically satisfying account of successful petitionary prayer. The defence Parker and Rettler offer, while it shows conceptual space for effective prayer, would have this prayer be pointless when considered from the point of view of objective value. If prayer is, as it were, a zero-sum game, then petitionary prayer might be formally effective but practically dubious. This defence alone doesn't give the right account of petitionary prayer: it only permits a restricted range for effective petitionary prayer and thereby fails to do justice to the practice of such prayer.

So we are better served to consider scenarios like the one described as undermining premise (3) rather than describing the mechanism by which petitionary prayer actually works. Such cases flag an underlying problem with the premise. (3) employs a notion of value according to which it is always determinate whether an event is overall better to occur than not,

²¹As Parker and Rettler point out ("A Possible Worlds Solution to The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," Sect. 4), not all prayers satisfying the criteria they impose will necessarily be successful. So not only will a small number of prayers be able to be answered, given the constraints of balancing values, but not all of those prayers able to be answered are in fact answered. So the number of successful prayers is even lower than the criteria allow.

and uses a notion of God as a value-calculating machine who simply selects the better of two alternatives. Each of these aspects can be challenged.

Firstly, it requires that all relevant outcomes are commensurable in value. For if not, God cannot compare alternatives and choose the better one. However, outcomes could be incommensurable by having incommensurable values. As an example, suppose that both aesthetic and hedonic values play a role in God's choice between alternative events, that these are incommensurable, and that neither trumps the other. Suppose two inconsistent events e and f have different values such that e 's aesthetic value is higher than f 's but f 's hedonic value is higher than e 's. Which event occurs? If the values are incommensurable then there is no metric for comparing them, and if neither value trumps the other then neither dominates the other in decision-making. How, then, can God choose between them, if God's choice only depends on their values? The same problem arises if, for instance, different moral values are incommensurable. If God chooses to actualise an event if and only if it is better to occur than not, we must be able to calculate whether it is indeed better to occur than not. For this to be so, we need to rule out that the event's occurrence and its non-occurrence are incommensurable. But we shouldn't rule out such incommensurability, at least not without examining the evidence.²²

To show how incommensurable outcomes might solve the problem of petitionary prayer, let's use a toy example. Suppose there is an event such that the occurrence of the event and the non-occurrence of the event exhibit incommensurable values. In other words, there is no metric for ranking the occurrence of the event against the non-occurrence of the event. In such a case, it doesn't make sense to ask whether the event is better to occur or not: there is no answer to this question. God's choice whether to actualise the event or not cannot be determined solely on the basis of value. Now suppose that I pray for the event to occur. My prayer may well add value to the occurrence of the event. But the occurrence and non-occurrence of the event will most likely remain incommensurable.²³ Nevertheless, my prayer might give God a reason to choose that the event occur rather than not, and hence the event could counterfactually depend on the prayer. It can do so either in virtue of adding value or even simply by giving God a new reason for choosing between incomparable alternatives.

²²There is large literature discussing incommensurable value: whether values can be incommensurable, whether they are incommensurable, as well as various more specific issues. A good place to start is with the edited collection Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*.

²³There is the possibility that my prayer renders them comparable, for instance if the value added by the prayer is commensurate with and at least as large as the value of the non-occurrence of the event, or if the value added by the prayer trumps any value of the non-occurrence of the event. In such cases, a denial of premise (5) as discussed in the last section might be enough. But it would be a strong claim that this is always the case with answered petitionary prayer.

More generally, once we admit the possibility that the values of an event's occurrence and non-occurrence are incommensurable, (3) cannot be true. So, we can see how critical to the argument it is to assume that the relevant outcomes are all commensurable. The argument requires that an event's occurrence and its non-occurrence can always be compared. This is a non-trivial assumption. For instance, if there are any incommensurable values then there may well be incommensurable outcomes which display these. Arguing for incommensurable values is therefore one avenue to blocking the argument. To put it another way: until we are given reason to suppose that the relevant outcomes are all commensurable, we shouldn't accept the argument against the effectiveness of petitionary prayer.

The second line of objection I wish to press concerns the tacit understanding of God's moral nature. (3) assumes that God always selects the better ranked alternative. But this is a controversial assumption, even setting aside incommensurability. It relies on a view of moral perfection as consisting in choosing things based solely on their overall value. Plausibly, overall value depends on the individual values and some system of weighting and aggregation (if not, overall value seems untethered from individual values). God then selects the highest ranked alternative. The kind of aggregative moral outlook this implies is by no means unreasonable, especially for the divine, but nor is it indubitable.²⁴ For one thing, there is an ambiguity about whether 'overall best' is to be understood from our point of view or the point of view of the divine. If our morals and God's are different, then which is to get priority?²⁵ But more problematically, this view of God's morals is in tension with other aspects of God's nature. For instance, if the overall better alternative required God to lie, would God therefore lie? This might sound strange.²⁶ One coherent view of God's impeccability is as sinlessness: God never commits an intrinsically bad action. (Of course, such an account of sinlessness can be contested.) On this view, even God cannot commit a wrong for a greater right. If so, then impeccability cuts against an account of God's choices that involves simply aggregating values. This is particularly vivid when discussing horrendous evils: events that are supposedly intrinsically so bad that God could not bring them about even if they were *overall* good.²⁷ For instance, it seems unjust to create an innocent individual to suffer intensely and then perish even if this would make the world overall better by some compensatory goods. So, God's justice does not seem well-served by this aggregative model (though, of course, there is room for disagreement here). Finally, al-

²⁴The aggregative picture does not strictly require a consequentialist account of ethics, but it is well-suited to one. For reasons to think that consequentialism is incompatible with Christianity, see Chappell, "Why God is not a Consequentialist."

²⁵See Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, for an argument that God's ethics differ from our own.

²⁶Though see Hudson, "Father of Lies?" for an interesting discussion of whether God could lie.

²⁷See the classic Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, for example.

ternative accounts of the constraints of God's decision-making in creating are available. I have in mind particularly accounts according to which God *satisfices*. Satisficing is choosing a good-enough alternative, rather than choosing the best alternative. If God need not choose the best, but only choose a world which is good enough, then (3) is simply false. God need not only actualise an event if it is overall better to occur or not. God may choose to actualise some event which is overall worse to occur than not, as long as the world as a whole is above some threshold. There are a number of proponents of such satisficing views, though of course they are liable to criticism as well.²⁸ At the very least, the fact that there is a debate about God as a satisficer shows (3) is problematic.

These issues give us initial reason to doubt the picture of God as straightforwardly choosing between alternatives based only on their overall value. In order to underline this doubt, I want to point to the force of premise (3) in a different context. In particular, premise (3) is closely connected to the problem of evil. (3) states that God actualises all and only the events which are overall better to occur than not. It appears the world contains many events which would be overall better not to occur. This, in brief, is the problem of evil. The theist has additional reason to doubt (3) if it leads so straightforwardly to a particularly intransigent version of the problem of evil.

Now the relationship between the problem of petitionary prayer and the problem of evil is a contentious one. Stump herself, indeed, recognizes that the puzzle of petitionary prayer she presents is a form of the problem of evil. However, this has not been widely accepted in the literature. The Howard-Snyders, for instance distinguish between the problem of evil and the problem of petitionary prayer in their "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," stating that "We have been addressing the puzzle of petitionary prayer. We take it that *that* puzzle is *not*, at bottom, just the problem of evil" (p. 66). They take the problem of petitionary prayer to be a problem over and above the problem of evil, not a special case of the latter. Swinburne, too, takes the problems to be distinct (though he understands the institution of petitionary prayer itself as a part of an adequate response to the problem of evil).²⁹ Nevertheless, there are some who *do* see the problem of petitionary prayer as a special case of the problem of evil.³⁰ I am not com-

²⁸There is an interesting, substantial and growing literature on this question. Work by Robert Adams, "Must God Create the Best?," van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," and the Howard-Snyders, "How and Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World," seem to suggest a satisficing model (though see Tucker, "Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization [in the Philosophy of Religion]," for the argument that only a weaker 'motivated submaximisation' claim is required). Representatives of critical voices include Kraay, "Can God Satisfice" and Wielenberg, "A Morally Unsurpassable God Must Create the Best." I'm grateful to Tim Mawson for raising this, and to Vince Vitale for discussion (including of his own work in the area).

²⁹Personal correspondence.

³⁰As an example, see Cohoe, "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer." He argues that the problem of petitionary prayer is a specific version of the problem of evil, and hence

mitted here to the problem of petitionary prayer being no more than an instance of the problem of evil. But I do want to suggest that the problem with petitionary prayer, as I have presented it, does indeed rely on (some of) the same mechanisms as the problem of evil. Even if it is not *just* the problem of evil, the central dynamic is shared.

As I have said above, this means that the theist should be wary of (3). But it also means, more concretely, that theodicies which undermine premise (3) can also be deployed to undermine the problem of petitionary prayer. I won't have space here to elaborate on the ways that (3) can be challenged by work in the problem of evil literature (not least due to the voluminous nature of that literature). But I do wish simply to flag that (3) comes under additional strain from work in that area.³¹

In sum, then, (3) is seriously vulnerable. What it proposes is that God's decisions about which events the world contains is a unilateral and determinate process which relies only on the values that those events have. There are a number of reasons to doubt that the existence of God of traditional theism leads to a world in which all and only events which are better to occur than not do in fact occur. Firstly, there seem counter-example cases such as worlds which are tied in value or ever increasing in value. Secondly, it requires the implausible premise that all values are commensurable. Thirdly, the view requires a strong aggregative view of God's moral decision making. Finally, responses to the problem of evil will undermine the inference. Replies to the problem of petitionary prayer are therefore available, and numerous, if we approach it through the problem of evil.

For what it's worth, my own preference in undermining (3) is to reject the required model of God's decision about which world to create. It isn't obvious that traditional theism requires God to bring about events based just on their (overall) value. God needn't be thought of as the infallible decision theorist in the sky. But I hope to have shown the more general point that the right place to focus attention in replying to the problem of petitionary prayer, and its generalisation to all human action, is premise (3) rather than on premise (5).

I wish to make a final point before summing up. I have argued that we should deny (3) (and thereby (3')) and in doing so we solve both the canon-

generalises the former problem to all events (having already generalised it to all non-divine action).

³¹It is easy to see how theodicies which restrict God's power, knowledge or goodness would thereby deny (3). For instance, if God is less than perfectly powerful then factors outside God's control might influence which events come about, and so God wouldn't be able to ensure that only overall-better-than-not events occurred. But these sorts of theodicies might not uphold the God of traditional theism, and my project involves retaining this.

It has been pointed out to me by Agustin Echavarria that sceptical theism might be a response to the problem of evil which doesn't translate to the petitionary prayer case, because it accepts (3) but denies instead that we (can expect to) know the relevant values. I think this is correct, and so a sceptical theist will not be able to avail themselves of this aspect of my argument.

ical and the revised versions of the problem. Part of my argument against (3) was to reject a flat-footed notion of value and value-aggregation that is implied by it. However, in constructing the revised argument above and showing how its conclusion (9') was unacceptable (Sect. 2), I employed just such a notion of value to make my case. Isn't this unfair? It seems I am allowing myself a more sophisticated account of value to undermine (3) while using a less sophisticated account to criticise those who put forward the typical solutions. This is indeed the case. But it is reasonable. For the revised argument is successful as it stands against the typical solutions: it shows that they only allow an unacceptably restrictive range of cases for effective petitionary prayer. The current solutions accept premise (3) and the notion of value it employs: their objection is to premise (5). If, on reflection, proponents of the current solutions want to reject (3), then they are very welcome to. But this is to accept my solution, and renders their pre-existing solutions unnecessary.

I take it that (3), not (5), is the deeper problem with the argument against effective petitionary prayer. By rejecting (3) we can also reject the revised problem, and so avoid restrictions on effective petitionary prayer. In this way, I believe, we can provide a satisfying general account of why prayer can make a difference.

To conclude this section, let me recap. When we began this part of the paper, the revised problem of petitionary prayer was unanswered. I have argued this problem has an answer. The answer is to reject premise (3)/(3'), which claims that God choses to actualise all and only events which are overall better to occur than not. This is implausible, and it is implausible that this follows from traditional theism. This can be bolstered by comparison with the problem of evil case. The problem of petitionary prayer can be seen to operate by the same mechanism as arguments from evil. Notwithstanding the serious issues that evil raises for belief in the God of theism, petitionary prayer doesn't add to the worries of the theist. Although the problem of petitionary prayer is unsolved, it is solvable.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the effectiveness of petitionary prayer given the benevolent and omnipotent nature of God. By casting the argument in a more formal structure, rather than the usual dilemma form, we have been able to make some progress. I hope to have established the following: (i) the typical solutions to the problem are not satisfactory because they permit a revised form of the problem, (ii) both the canonical and revised versions have a dubious premise about God's choice to actualise events and (iii) this premise is also at work in the problem of evil, and can be undermined.

In this way, I aim to have demonstrated that petitionary prayer is not something that should be an additional source of concern for the theist.³²

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