

CAUSAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PRAYER

An essay by **Avi Sion** (2022)

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My primary incursion into Theology has been the question of whether the existence of God can be proved or disproved – and my answer has consistently been that we can do neither decisively, but must take that proposition on faith, or refuse it on more or less the same uncertain ground. I have also done work on the issue of the causality of Creation, arguing that God’s relation to His Creation would have to be volitional rather than causative, i.e. based on freewill and not on determinism (and even less on chance).

Here I wish to examine the metaphysics of prayer. What are the implications of praying, specifically as regards the causal relationship between God and His Creation? For when I pray (and I do), it is evident that I am *assuming* that God is involved day by day, minute by minute, in the workings of this world. And this, not just for little me, but for everyone and everything. If I even just say ‘God be with me’ as I leave my home, I am already assuming God’s involvement.

1. Varieties of prayer

The term ‘prayer’ is quite broad, including many utterances about God or aimed at God¹. Some prayers are **descriptive and/or prescriptive**. A notable example, with both these characters, is the *Shema Israel* prayer² in the Jewish prayer book, which is recited by pious Jews morning and evening. For examples, a descriptive element in it are the words “the Lord our God, the Lord is One”; a prescriptive element in it is “Hear Israel”, and another further on is “And you shall love the Lord your God...”; and there are many more examples of both.

Many prayers of *praise* are enumerations of God’s many powers and qualities; the laudatory aspect being implied by the very act of listing. In the Jewish context, the many and various blessings of God are laudatory prayers; so are many of the psalms. The term ‘halleluyah’ is a literally call to praise God. Prayers of praise acknowledge and celebrate God’s great powers and moral qualities; and are means for expressing one’s personal love and respect for Him and devotion to His cause. When such prayers are uttered, one is confirming one’s faith in the things said in the traditional creed about God and about the behavior He reportedly expects of us.

Mostly, we think of ‘prayer’ as referring to **petition**, words through which we ask for something from God. The range of our requests is very large, covering all our normal material, mental and spiritual concerns. We may pray for oneself, for one’s family and friends, for one’s people or country, for all humanity, even for animals. We often pray for understanding and achievement on the spiritual, ethical, intellectual, and behavioral planes; for physical and mental health and

¹ Needless to say, I use the English word God as referring to the Deity of the Jews, even though this word is not Hebrew and not one of His many names in the Jewish sources.

² Drawn from Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, and Num. 15:37-41.

longevity; for a fitting spouse and good children; for economic and financial sustenance; for professional capacities and success; for social respect and recognition; for political freedom and justice; for security and victory over evil people; and for harmony and peace.

Turning again for an example to the Jewish prayer book, if we look at the weekdays' *Amidah* (standing prayer, comprising nineteen petitions each ending in a benediction), we can see the great variety of objects that petitionary prayer may have. Briefly put, there is a prayer for support, protection and salvation; another for the gift of life to the dead; another hailing holiness; there are others for knowledge, for penitence, for pardon, for redemption, for healing of the sick, for material and emotional blessings, for ingathering of exiles, for righteousness and justice, for humbling of the arrogant, for mercy towards the righteous, for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, for messianic salvation, for answers to our prayers, for the return of God's presence in Zion, for gratitude, for enduring strength and peace, and much more³.

All the prayers in the *Amidah*, note, include praise (blessing) of God, as well as overt or implied petitions. Some include prayers of *thanksgiving*. The latter, it should be noted, may refer to petitionary prayers that have already been answered, or may simply express gratitude for God's constant and manifold goodness towards us even without His waiting for our prayers.

An important form of prayer is *confession and penitence*. In confession we recognize our sins and transgressions, our moral and spiritual failures, our bad behavior; and in penitence we resolve to avoid such foolishness and change our ways for the better. A petition is involved in such prayer: a request for forgiveness. We may ask *questions* of God, hoping for answers. Prayer is communication with God, and sometimes this may take a reproachful turn. Prayers of *complaint* occur when someone has suffered greatly and does not see what the point of it all was. Here, the petition is for release from pain.

Note again that one may pray for oneself or on behalf of others. The same diverse categories of prayer as are found in formal prayer are also found, of course, in informal prayer. All this clearly assumes that God is very actively involved in the minutest details of the world-process long after the moment of Creation as such, including today. Alternatively, we could say that Creation is ongoing, with God fine-tuning His creation as interactively needed.

2. Divine providence

So, the act of prayer implies that, in discussing God's causal relation to the world, we must not just posit initial Creation, but must equally take into account *Providence*. And not just occasional punctual providence, but widespread and continual providence, covert if not overt. Without this assumption, our theology of Divine aetiology is obviously very deficient.

Note well that I am not here looking for or proposing some sort of *proof* of God's providence. I do not believe that any strict proof of it is possible. I am merely pointing out that as of the moment one prays one is logically *assuming* the existence of providence. It would be inconsistent to claim that God let the world proceed independently once He created it (as Deism and some earlier philosophies do), and at the same time indulge in any form of prayer to Him.

Needless to say, prayer is not a merely Jewish phenomenon, but is found in many other religious traditions, throughout history and to this day. In that case, the entity prayed to may or may not be

³ See David de Sola Pool, *Book of Prayers*. New York: Union of Sephardic Congregations, 1986.

God. Of course, the content and emphasis of prayers vary from one tradition to the next – indeed, from one person to the next, and even in different phases of one person’s life.

The primary assumption of Jewish prayer is that God is a Person, a purely spiritual being *with consciousness, freewill and values* (somewhat like ours, but infinitely greater, fuller and more accurate), albeit being devoid of materiality or material constraints (unlike us). If anything, God has much more ‘personality’ than we do, since whereas we are often unconscious or uncertain of what we are doing, or weak of will, or lacking in purpose or direction, thus resembling impersonal entities, none of these deficiencies can ever be ascribed to God.

Cognition, volition and valuation – in short, the possession of soul or spirit and its three essential functions – are what God has in common (though in widely different degrees) with us humans. His assumed abilities to hear prayer, evaluate the situation, and do something about it, signify continual interaction between Him and us. If God, say, had just issued some arbitrary commandments to us and then altogether withdrew, leaving His relationship with us at that simple level, without accepting feedback from us other than mere obedience or disobedience, our relation to Him would be much less complex than we commonly assume.

In Judaism, no one ought to, in principle, address prayers to anyone but God. We are supposed to have direct access at all times to God’s full attention and compassion, with no need of intermediaries. One may obviously, however, ask a live person, ordinary or saintly, to pray to God on one’s behalf, for whatever reason. Asking a *dead* person, ordinary or saintly, to pray to God on one’s behalf seems more problematic, since doing so is an act loaded with heavy assumptions about the continued existence of that dead person as an individual (albeit as a disembodied soul), and more to the point, that that person can hear one’s request and in turn engage in prayer to God. Still more problematic would be to petition a dead person for some active intervention *by* him or her besides mere prayer to God – here, one would be assigning some Godly powers to that person, thereby putting one’s monotheism in doubt.

Many Jews do go and pray by the graves of holy ancestors – e.g. at the Cave of Machpelah, Rachel’s Tomb, Joseph’s Tomb, or King David’s Tomb, and by the graves of famous rabbis, like R. Shimon Bar Yochai (in Meron, Israel) or R. Nachman of Breslov (in Uman, Ukraine) – but in principle they there simply recite prayers to God (e.g. Psalms): they do not usually petition the persons who are buried there (though maybe some individuals do so, I don’t know). It is noteworthy that Jews never pray to Moses.

We Jews do, on the Sabbath eve, sing a song addressed to two visiting angels, invisible messengers of God, asking them to bless us on His behalf. This is, to my knowledge, the only Jewish prayer not addressed directly to God (though it could well have been so formulated). The idea of these angels comes from the Talmud, but the poem is a late composition (introduced by kabbalists circa 1700 CE). This song has rightly received some criticism from prominent rabbis (notably R. Jacob Emden, in his prayer book of 1745), but is now well established in all prayer books. Most people do not reflect on the metaphysical implications of their praying to anyone besides God.

In any case, our supplications are certainly not addressed to a mere impersonal entity or process or force, say like that implied by the concept of karma (which refers to a supposed ‘appropriate reaction, sooner or later, to every action’ mechanism of justice-without-mercy programmed in nature). It would be absurd to pray for help to a mere ‘it’, a deaf and blind, powerless, and indifferent object, devoid of personality – e.g. a stone statue or the Sun or even ‘the Universe’.

Buddhists and Hindus (who both believe in karma) do not, of course, pray for help to karma, but rather respectively to buddhas⁴ and bodhisattvas, or multiple gods; thereby ascribing to these limited entities supernatural powers capable of changing the course of events (which is somewhat paradoxical, since one's karma is in principle inevitable and unavoidable until and unless one attains liberation/enlightenment). Sundry remaining pagans or idolaters do seemingly worship inanimate material objects, although most of them perhaps regard their idols as mere conduits to a more 'living' entity (e.g. a particular 'spirit' or a 'demon' or whatever).

Christians and Muslims do pray to the God of monotheism, according to major Jewish commentators. But Christians often tend to rather pray to Jesus (whom they openly view as a divine being, and not merely as a human intercessor)⁵, and to sundry (in their eyes) saints alive or long dead. As for Muslims, they seem to consider their 'prophet' Muhammed as a quasi-divine being, since they regard any criticism of him as 'blasphemy'⁶. They do, I gather, address some words of salutation to him in their daily prayers⁷; but I do not know (have not yet tried investigating) whether they ever address any petitions to him, which would constitute deviation from monotheistic practice⁸.

⁴ I think anyway that when ordinary Buddhists pray to 'the Buddha' they are unconsciously in effect praying to God. Their prayers in such cases are directed towards 'Heaven', rather than towards an enlightened man, i.e. the historical founder of Buddhism, or to a statue thereof. Even so, it does seem (to an outsider like me) that they regard the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas as having some life and personality of their own. I refer here to popular Buddhism, as distinct from the more intellectual normative religion(s).

⁵ Christians believe in a 'trinity', the father (of Jesus), the son (Jesus), and the holy ghost (apparently, a reification of the divine spirit active in the world), which they consider not as three distinct gods but as three aspects of one and the same godhead. In my personal view, this does not qualify as 'monotheism' in the sense Judaism attaches to the term. Christians, of course, regard their 'father' figure as corresponding to the Jewish concept of God, since that was historically the source of their notion. But they are not in fact identical ideas, but radically different ones, because Judaism certainly rejects the fantasies of God incarnating in human form or having a divine human offspring (such fantasies being distinctly pagan – as evidenced by their presence in pre-Judaic religions and in polytheist Hinduism). I do not intend this remark to be offensive, but only accurate. We often speak of the 'three monotheistic faiths', for the sake of peace between our three population groups (which is of course very desirable); but in an intellectual discussion we are duty-bound to be lucid and honest.

⁶ To my mind, applying the term 'blasphemy' to criticism of Muhammed constitutes idolatry; all the more so since such accusation is sometimes coupled with heavy corporal, even capital, punishment. We often read of such harsh sentences being meted out even today in fanatic Islamic regimes like Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia. I must say, I have little respect for any faith that resorts to or tolerates religious terrorism in this day and age.

⁷ Muslims do address words (in the second person) to Muhammed in some daily prayers, e.g. when they say "Peace be on you, O Prophet." This implies they believe that he is alive somewhere (in 'heaven', presumably) and able to hear their millions of daily salutations from afar. But those particular words do not constitute a prayer of petition; they only add up to a salutation. I do not know if there are, in Muslim prayers, words addressed to Muhammed which constitute petitions to him.

⁸ Regarding the 'monotheism' of Islam, I would like here to reiterate what I have said in previous works. Although it is known and indubitable that Muhammed's idea of Allah was derived from the Jewish teaching of God, it does not follow that these concepts exactly correspond. This is evident from the words attributed to Allah against Jews in Koran and Hadith (scripture and oral tradition), words that could not conceivably ever have been uttered by the God of the Jews (to a non-Jew, to boot). The two deities cannot truly be considered one and the same, since their alleged thoughts, words and deeds are not mutually consistent. It is not a matter of their having different divine names, but of the content and connotations of their names, i.e. the different religious beliefs encapsulated in them. There is some overlap in beliefs, but not all beliefs are held in common; and the differences are significant. Therefore, the monotheism (i.e. worship of a unique, single, overriding god) of Muslims is not identical with that of Jews – an effectively different 'theos' is involved, though each is claimed to be one and only. The term 'monotheism' does not have a unitary, exclusive reference; it is rather vague regarding the god intended. Again, I do not intend this remark to be offensive, but only accurate.

Prayer in front of images (in two or three dimensions) representing some god or saint is practiced not only by Hindus and Buddhists, but also by Catholic and Orthodox Christians; but (to their credit) not by Protestant Christians or Muslims or Jews. The idea behind such prayer is presumably that the statue or illustration ‘channels’ the prayer to the person the image ‘represents’. Or maybe, the idea is more simply that the image helps the worshipper to focus his attention on the faraway person worshipped. In any case, God is too abstract a concept to be represented in material images⁹.

It should be said that although all adherents to a certain religion ostensibly pray to the same godly person, they may not in fact have identical conceptions of that person; one might even go so far as to say that every individual necessarily has a somewhat different de facto conception. In Judaism, it is evident that different commentators have somewhat different conceptions of God; and there have been many different schools of thought across time. Notably, within the Talmud, among the medieval commentators, among the mystics, in Hasidism, and in modern times, we can observe different viewpoints and sometimes marked controversies among commentators. Notwithstanding, these are all regarded as referring to one and the same God, the God of Judaism.

The point to stress here is that whatever one’s conception, whether one prays to God or to some other god or to a saint, such praying implicitly ascribes certain powers, indeed superpowers, supernatural powers, to the deity or saint addressed. In petitionary prayer, the addressee is assumed able to hear the prayer and to respond to it at will. Otherwise, one would not bother praying. Praying is not the same as mere wishing or hoping, which are passive expressions; by praying for something we attempt to positively *affect* the course of events, albeit indirectly.

3. Divine interference in nature and human lives

And of course, this discussion takes us straight into the minefield of *theodicy* (discussions on the justice of God): why does God not help good people when He ought to do so (in our eyes), and also why does he apparently helps bad people when he ought not to do so (in our eyes)? For even if we grant the general principle that God abstains from interference in the affairs of his creatures (individual humans in particular, but also individual animals, and maybe even individual plants), it is often unclear why He would abstain in certain particular cases or situations for which (again in our eyes) abstinence brings no benefit whatever to His creation but on the contrary perhaps causes great damage to it.

Notably, it is absurd to claim that God did not kill the likes of Hitler or Stalin or Mao early on in their careers, because He wanted to give these evil individuals time to either damn themselves fully or to grow spiritually and choose good over evil! The obvious question to ask here is: what about their millions of *victims*, the overwhelming majority of who were innocent of any crime deserving the horrific suffering they endured in one way or another – why were *they* not given a lifetime to grow spiritually and do good? Why were their many and urgent prayers and screams not heard? The same can be said regarding other, lesser murderers and sundry monsters, of course.

⁹ Although Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel paintings by comes to mind, where God is depicted as a superb old man. Statues and illustrations, of course, serve the religion concerned, as an institution, by reminding all passers-by of its gods and saints; they are, as well as spiritual reminders, expressions of social and political power held by the institution and its guardians. A similar role is played, for religions that do not resort to statues and illustrations, by abstract symbols like the cross, the crescent or the six-pointed star or by selected words and phrases.

Clearly, the thesis that God allows evil to grow and act in order to make room for human freewill, while it sounds reasonable initially if thus vaguely formulated, does not stand up to scrutiny if considered in more detail. The issue is: whose freewill is being more protected, the good people's or the bad people's? Just how is the world's spiritual development improved when relatively or absolutely evil people are given, for any lapse of time, power of life and death over relatively or absolutely good people? We have no plausible answers to such radical questions.

Some thinkers claim that after the initial act of creation God has abstained from interfering in human affairs so as to ensure our freedom of the will and moral responsibility. But there is clearly a contradiction of sorts between this particular theistic (notably Deist) claim, which would involve at best mechanical karma (which is empirically not evident), and the widespread belief among most monotheists that we can pray to God and expect Him to interfere in the detailed manner already indicated, out of justice and mercy.

Prayer necessarily implies continual and intentional Divine interference in the world process, or at least in the lives of humans. God's interference is logically implied by petitionary prayers, which look forward to possible events, before the fact; and equally by prayers of thanksgiving and even of praise, which look back on past or current events, after the fact.

The big question is, of course, how such interference might be compatible with Natural Law. But, regarding this issue, the thesis that God's intervention occurs, as it were, *behind the scenes*, in ways that are not perceived inductively when we empirically observe and conceptually formulate (using the scientific method) apparent natural laws, is easy to deal with logically. This statement can be understood if we keep in mind that all our assumed 'natural laws' are ultimately based on generalization of a relatively limited number of observations – never on complete enumeration of all occurrences of the phenomena concerned in the whole universe and throughout time.

It is not theoretically inconceivable that God might abstain from breaking an apparent law while it is publicly being scrutinized by scientists; and yet go ahead and break it when no one is watching! This could be said of any natural law, even (say) one as certain to contemporary science as the law of conservation of matter and energy. In any case, if perchance we spotted a breach of the law, we would simply consider such breach as a perfectly natural phenomenon – and particularize the previous formulation of the law, making it less general, more conditional. But in such event, it could be said that God deliberately revealed the irregularity because He wanted us to narrow the presumed law's scope¹⁰. So, there is really no possible logical objection to conceiving God as engaged in 'hidden' breaches of natural law, possibly without ever being 'found out' (if He chose not to be).

This is even truer when we consider medical phenomena, which are not subject to such hard and fast rules, but rather to probabilities, due to multiple conditions of causation and acts of volition being involved in them. Thus, if a person is suffering from a very problematic disease and prays to God for a cure, or someone prays on his or her behalf; and that person quite unexpectedly suddenly recovers (as happens occasionally), it is not unthinkable that a miracle did indeed occur, i.e. that God actually interfered in some way (for instance, by secretly weakening or killing off attacking viruses) and cured the seemingly hopeless case. There is no way to prove this was indeed

¹⁰ For all we know, the seemingly lawless, indeterministic behavior of subatomic particle-wave phenomena might be due – not to natural spontaneity as current science assumes – but to intentional, purposeful choices and acts of will by God, i.e. by God acting on the minutest details of Nature's unfolding. There is simply no way for us to tell the difference!

what happened; but on the other hand, there is no incontrovertible basis for skepticism. The same uncertainty applies to preventive supplications, asking God for protection from eventual dangers in general or specifically.

If one prays for good or bad and the requested event takes place, one cannot conclude that one's prayer (let alone all prayer) was effective, as this would constitute *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacious argument (and for all prayer, added generalization). If one prays for good or bad and the opposite occurred, one cannot infer that prayer in general is useless, as it is conceivable that God decided not to grant this particular petition but might still choose to satisfy others.¹¹

Furthermore, many of our prayers have more to do with mental/spiritual issues than with material/physiological ones. We may pray for mental health, for insight and wisdom, for courage and strength, for happiness, for familial, social, economic and political success, and so forth. Such prayers are obviously requests for Divine intervention into our own souls or minds, and/or those of others. These issues are not directly or exclusively related to the laws of material nature that physicists, chemists, biologists, astronomers, and the practitioners of other relatively exact sciences, are concerned with.

God is here, clearly, assumed to be able to affect at will our inner, psychological situation, as much as the bodily (including the nervous system) and material environment of our lives. Such interference might take many forms: it might consist in *blocking* a person's intended act of will (affecting the internal causative environment of volition), or making a person's act of willing or of abstaining from some will *more or less difficult* as appropriate (influencing volition through consciousness of some positive or negative consideration), or simply making the person's volition *successful or unsuccessful* by controlling the external causal (causative or volitional) environment.

The claim here is that God can indeed invisibly manipulate our brains and body and surrounds, and even (through influence rather than determinism) our soul's efforts – *without* thereby denying the principle of freedom of the will (human or other). There is little expectation that science might *detect* such manipulations, today or ever in the future. The claim is therefore necessarily speculative, an issue of faith – though certainly abstractly conceivable and not logically impossible.

Thus, our resort to prayer implies that God is potentially actively involved in our individual and collective lives, and perhaps equally that of other animal species and even of plants (as when people pray for the wellbeing of their livestock or crops), in a very detailed way and at many levels. What sort of interference in nature would that have to be? Obviously, God might intervene on His own initiative, independently of prayer; but where prayer was involved, God can be construed as having heard the prayer and made a decision to intervene (or not), based on ad hoc justice and mercy considerations, and His wider plans and goals for the person or people concerned, and even for the whole world.

Thus, the central assumption of praying is that God *hears* all prayer and may freely choose to consciously respond positively to it by means of pointed *conscious acts of will* on His part. The

¹¹ This conundrum is illustrated in the Biblical book of Jonah (4:1-2). Jonah was ordered by God to call on Nineveh to repent or face destruction; it seems that he tried to avoid doing so because he thought that if Nineveh repented he would be made ridiculous since his warning of destruction would not have come true. But that was invalid reasoning in that we cannot estimate *ex post facto* what was initially decreed to occur (destruction in this case) merely by looking at what did ultimately occur (repentance and non-destruction).

assumption is that He relates causally to the world by intentional volition on a day-to-day basis, not merely at the first act of creation.

Some commentators claim that the assumption of petitionary prayer is that we have the power to change God's mind by its means. This is a silly objection, because we do not force God to change His mind – He changes His own mind by freewill. Some rebut that God never changes His mind and therefore that prayer is useless. There is no basis for such claim, because there is no a priori impossibility that God might keep an open mind and adapt His decisions to changing circumstances. After all, we believe that He has given us freewill, and therefore accepts a measure of moment-by-moment uncertainty in the unfolding of the world¹².

Without doubt, God does not need our prayers to know what is going on at a given time and to make decisions; but when we petition Him, we presumably voluntarily add *an additional factor* which may well (or may not) tip the scales on our behalf. That added factor may simply be the recognition by us, in the act of petitioning, that God is in charge of things and is the One to appeal to in all circumstances. By praying for valuable and virtuous outcomes, we show God that we are, or wish to be, on His side, the side of good, and we acknowledge His justice and mercy. That may be all that is needed to tip the scales in our favor with regard to the issue at hand.

4. The spiritual side of existence

While there is no technical reason to doubt the possibility of Divine providence, we can still of course ask why God would intervene at all, knowing that we are tiny inhabitants of a tiny planet in a tiny solar system, which is one of billions in a tiny galaxy, which is in turn one of billions in the known universe, which might in turn be but one of billions of universes in a yet unknown infinite multiverse! Given that we are individually and collectively truly minute entities, mere specks of dust – why would a God who created such a massive world have any interest in us? We would not adopt microbes as pets; why would God adopt us? When the world was thought to be relatively small, we could well imagine that we humans have some importance in the scheme of things; but now we know better, it seems far less likely.

But the answer to that objection could be that the vastness of material creation is relatively unimportant compared to the less visible spiritual sphere of existence. In this parallel 'dimension' or 'domain' of existence, which is perhaps God's own 'substance', whose 'light' all human souls are but tiny 'sparks' of¹³, our lives may well have great significance in God's eyes, inciting Him to engage in micromanagement of the material and mental aspects of our existences for our spiritual benefit. The thing to keep in mind when considering this deeper issue is that the world is clearly not the merely material entity that modern science dogmatically assumes. It is still quite materialist and has *not even begun* to deal with the mysteries of consciousness and volition in any credible detailed manner.

¹² This said leaving apart the issue of Divine knowledge across time, of past, present, and future events, which can be said to occur on a higher level. I have addressed this issue elsewhere, explaining that just as we experience the present as an extended moment (albeit small) of time, rather than as a mere instant (i.e. point) of time, so presumably for God the present is a moment so greatly extended that it englobes all past and present and future events in one sweep. Thus, God can conceivably see our volitional choices beyond time without affecting our freedom.

¹³ I put all these terms in inverted commas to signify that they are only intended as rough analogies and not to be taken literally. To speak of spirituality, we are forced to appeal somewhat to material notions of substance or place; but that is mere imagery, not implying that such notions are really applicable.

For a start, most philosophers and scientists have not yet realized that there is an inconsistency in their theory that what we perceive in sense-perception (especially of sights and sounds) are *mental images of* external objects rather than the external objects (or aspects thereof) *themselves*. If all we ever perceived were mental images, there would be no thought of or basis for claiming external objects, and therefore no way to ever test the validity or not of our perceptions. Clearly, the fact of perception is much more mysterious than it seems at first blush, and we are still very far from understanding it theoretically.

Likewise, our current theories of the material universe do not take into consideration, let alone explain in sufficiently deep and convincing ways, the amazing facts of consciousness and volition. There are currently many efforts to empirically demonstrate that living matter mechanically evolves from inanimate matter under certain circumstances; but even if that is proven, it will still be necessary to find mathematical formulas which predict and explain such derivation, and those are still very far off. There are certainly to date no mathematical formulas that lead from living matter to consciousness and volition. Consciousness and volition cannot to date be scientifically predicted and explained from known laws of physics; they are not covered by those laws. Modern biology prefers to avoid these subjects, as does physics theory, because they are still much too abstruse for us.

Indeed, even with regard to inanimate matter and physical life, while modern science has made very impressive progress in *describing* the evolution of matter and then life from the Big Bang to this day on our Earth, it has not so far succeeded in *explaining why* existents and the laws of nature controlling them are as they are and not otherwise. I am not just referring to the obvious questions of how the initial substance which exploded came to at all be and how it came to suddenly explode, but moreover to all the details of material evolution that followed. How come the original energy or matter *had it programmed within itself* to evolve in the complicated ways that it did, forming light, more and more complex elementary particles, then molecules, and ultimately life and then consciousness and volition? Why were the formative forces involved (gravity, electromagnetism, etc.) as we have found them to be and not otherwise? Modern science just takes these natural events as givens – but they are still very mysterious and likely to stay that way forever.

All this said in passing, to remind us that atheism is far from triumphantly established and that we have good reason to continue wondering at the miracle of existence! Note well, however, that this does not mean that the creation narrative found in the Torah (and other such religious tracts), the timing and sequence of events there proposed, taken literally, has any credibility left today. It is already certain that things proceeded very differently in fact. Sad, but true¹⁴. Fundamentalists

¹⁴ It would be nice if religious belief was still today as in the past a simple affair; but things have become far more complex, and the believer has to work his or her way through the intellectual difficulties now involved. The important thing is to remain scrupulously honest at all times: there is no virtue in faking solutions to problems or pretending there are no problems to solve. The most absurd and dishonest general argument often used by apologists (in print and orally) is to say that since scientific theories are open to debate and yield only probable conclusions, and are constantly changing, they are no better indeed less reliable than faith-based claims. (Imagine if such a standard was used in a court of law, and the judge preferred an established prejudice devoid of proof to the evolving results of detailed field investigations and careful reasoning – inevitably, an innocent man would be condemned or a guilty one would be cleared.) Science is an inductive discipline, based on precise empirical studies and stringent logical arguments, all peer reviewed (this is ideally true, although it must be acknowledged that sometimes unscientific ideologies with political motives are peddled as science). Serious science certainly does not consist of pure leaps of faith like religious claims do. It necessarily evolves over time as research uncovers new factual data and proposes new hypotheses for their explanation. That is so because man is not omniscient and never will be. He must work hard to

refuse to admit it or try hard to ignore it, but they only fool themselves because the evidence in favor of the current scientific viewpoint is overwhelming.

Notwithstanding, belief in God as Creator and as Providence is not logically affected by the scientific debunking of the Biblical scenario, even if some ideological atheists claim otherwise. Such belief is still rationally sustainable, for the simple reason that, being a spiritual hypothesis, it can adapt to any material conditions. It is not falsifiable by any discovery relating to matter. Provided we do not attach our belief in God to any given creation thesis, but always accept the latest scientific verdict as the best bet, we can always retort ‘well, that’s the way God chose to do things’!

5. The utility and value of prayer

The prime *purpose* of petitionary prayer is to call for God’s attention on something of interest to us. We presume God is already, always and everywhere, aware of everything that is going on – yet we call on Him to deal with some particular subject of personal or communal interest to us. This signifies that the act of prayer carries some weight in God’s evaluation of the situation at hand – so that He usually or frequently acts differently when someone has prayed than He would have otherwise. Perhaps more urgently or slowly, or more favorably (more justly or more mercifully), as appropriate. Thus, prayer is granted value and efficacy by God – presumably because the one praying thereby gains merit and establishes a closer relation to Him.

Since petitionary prayer depends on Divine approval, it is not invariably efficacious; whence it follows that the efficacy of prayer cannot be proved (nor disproved) scientifically but must be taken on faith. Even so, prayer always has a potentially beneficial psychological effect, giving us hope and courage in difficult or dangerous situations. Sometimes, just believing that God is there, ready to give us help and support in case of need, suffices to buttress our understanding and courage, and give us hope, improving our chances of success. Someone like me, who has faith in and recourse to prayer, cannot comprehend how people who don’t pray manage to get through life’s difficulties.

Regarding the causal efficacy of petitionary prayers, nothing can be proved, or disproved, by empirical and statistical means. When we pray, we know in advance that there is no certainty that our prayer will be favorably received and answered as we wish; still, we pray and hope for that. It is obvious to us that God has His own agenda, and He may opt either way. Perhaps He always responds positively, to our benefit, but not necessarily in the precise way that we imagined and desired.

Nevertheless, those of us who pray can testify subjectively to the miraculous efficacy of prayer. There have been times in my personal experience when I earnestly tried and tried again and again to overcome some failing or weakness within me, yet I could not muster the courage or will needed. Then, through prayer, I suddenly found myself relieved of the fear or bad habit worrying me. I knew full well that it wasn’t my own doing, the independent power of my will, that solved the problem, since I had tried repeatedly, unsuccessfully to control myself. Just uttering prayers did

find the nearest thing to truth that he can at any given stage of research. At each stage, the proposed scientific view is in principle more intellectually reliable than those at all the preceding stages (including prescientific doctrines). This dynamic adaptation to new information and ideas is the very virtue and value of science, which distinguishes its claims from static religious dogma.

not change my mind, either, since my prayers were not immediately answered. It was obvious to me, when release finally came, that I owed it to God's gracious help. I think most people who pray have had similar experiences.

All that has been said above applies equally, of course, to formal and informal prayer. In Judaism, formal prayers are those given in the standard prayer books, which were composed by rabbis over many centuries using material found in the Bible and other traditional literature. These prayers purport to give voice to every occasion, situation, and need, albeit in a general way; and they may concern the community as a whole, as well as the individual. Informal prayers may likewise be communal or individual, but they are composed ad hoc spontaneously.

One might think that formal prayers are less valuable than informal ones, as they are uttered regularly, in some cases two or three times daily, and can easily become rote; but in truth, while one may say much of them unconsciously by force of habit, very often in the recitation some word or phrase or sentence or paragraph stands out with special force. Moreover, the formal prayers cover much ground, so that almost no normal need or kosher desideratum is forgotten; as a result, informal prayers are rarely required (which does not mean they are not valuable).

Of course, a spontaneous prayer, be it a cry for help or an expression of gratitude, is often more passionate and deeply heartfelt than a ritual one. But sometimes the opposite is true: saying ritual prayers in the company of other people can sometimes greatly enhance one's sense of contact with God and stimulate strong emotional reactions. This is no doubt why Jews preferably pray in groups of ten or more.

While the main purpose of prayer is communicating with God – by way of all kinds of supplication (including confession and begging for forgiveness), or praise and thanksgiving (acknowledging God's great qualities and creative and helpful acts) – prayer has many valuable *side-effects*.

In particular, it is worth focusing on the side-benefits of formal prayer. First, the contents of our set prayers are a *daily teaching and reminder* of Judaic values and disvalues, virtues and vices – telling us what is good or bad, what to do or avoid – and of Jewish history and hopes. Second, just uttering the prayers constitutes a statement of belief in God and the things they say. Third, having to recite certain prayers daily or weekly or seasonally, at specified times of the day, constitutes a beneficial *discipline*, structuring our days and tying us to our religion. Fourth, this is also *meditation*, since it demands our attention to the words uttered and concentration on their meanings.¹⁵

While such prayer tends to become rote to varying extent; it is never in truth devoid of intentionality (Heb. *kavanah*). Rather, it is similar to what occurs during silent meditation: we *weave in and out* of attentiveness, thinking of other things for a while and then returning to the meanings of the words uttered for a while. We may focus on some parts of our prayer for a while, and then get distracted by unrelated memories, issues or plans (or external events) for a stretch. Our degree of awareness of the prayers varies, going from high to low intensity and back again, depending on our energy level at the time.

¹⁵ Jewish prayer is normally in Hebrew. For those who lack, or are not fluent in, Hebrew, there are prayer books with translation into other languages. God is presumed to (obviously) understand all languages, so there is not a big problem in that respect. Nevertheless, Hebrew is preferred because it is the language the prayers were composed in and are recited in in synagogues, and it sounds very nice. For these reasons, many people who do not understand Hebrew still prefer to pray in that language if they are able to read it.

Singing out loud with other congregants in the synagogue, and indeed all active participation in the many rituals, is a good way momentarily forget one's problems or desires and to focus more fully on praying.

Sometimes, we may seem to be engaged in nothing more than lip service. But it would be unfair to so characterize our prayers if we recite them daily, weekly, or however regularly, when we already know and adhere to what they mean. We may be paying less attention to what we say right now than we ought to ideally, but still we do somewhat remember, and habitually subscribe to, the words uttered. This may be a weak form of *kavanah*, but it is still *kavanah*. This is like when we say 'Amen' to a prayer uttered by the cantor in the synagogue even though we did not actually hear what he said: we are confident of subscribing to whatever he said.

Thus, we always get at least some benefit from the formal prayers recited, even if not all the benefit we might have gotten with ideal degrees of mental effort. Even so, it is of course mandatory to try our best to pray with maximum concentration, so as to get the full benefit of the exercise. But sometimes, admittedly, we are simply too tired to be able to deliver; we are only human.

Anyway, all prayer is meaningful and valuable as an act of worship, as a statement of our belief in God and His providence and of our inspired choice of devotion to Him. Even when we pray without concentration – cursorily, speedily, while thinking of a multitude of other things, or because we are short of time – our prayer still embodies a significant sacrifice of our time, i.e. the gift of a part of our life we could have used in other ways. Prayer thus constitutes, at a minimum, a bit of self-sacrifice. Sometimes, this is all we want to do – merely to connect to God.

Another important side-benefit of prayer is that it makes us *more God-conscious* in our everyday lives, and thus enhances our spirituality and spiritual proximity to Him. The more we pray, formal or informal supplications and blessings, the more aware are we of God's presence in the world, and thus the closer we are to Him. That is why it is recommended by some great teachers to engage in a frequent if not continual 'dialogue' with God, at every opportunity asking for His help and support, apologizing for one's errors or misdeeds, thanking Him for His gifts, and so on – as if chatting with a human person one is living with here and now. To be sure, God does not ordinarily (unless you are a prophet, which is extremely unlikely nowadays) talk back in so many words; but one may with faith observe concrete results that may be regarded as His replies.

And of course, God-consciousness, i.e. the constant awareness through faith that God indeed exists and is actively involved in the world we reside in, encourages us to do good and abstain from bad, in thought, speech and action. In God's assumed presence, we are on our best behavior; and our mood is more optimistic and joyful. Inversely, if we sin we can (if we have any conscience left) feel the dismal loss and distancing from God which follows the sin. These experiences constitute additional valuable practical consequences of regular prayer.

Yet another wonderful side-benefit of prayer is due to the *sincerity* prayer demands. Since, we believe, God knows everything about us, including all our innermost emotions and thoughts, and all our most secret deeds, we cannot when we address Him pretend to be what we are not¹⁶. This is especially true of spontaneous personal prayer; but also, to a large extent, of fixed ritual prayers if we recite them with awareness of the meanings of their words. Since God knows precisely what

¹⁶ It should be said in passing that nothing is to be gained by resorting to alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs for the purpose of prayer. On the contrary, use of these substances makes any prayer insincere, since it is not the person one really is who is then praying but an artificial, modified version of oneself.

is in our hearts, and all details of our daily conduct, even more clearly than we do, we cannot be hypocritical but must be scrupulously honest with Him. We cannot fool Him, even when we are able to fool ourselves or others; we must speak truly. Therefore, if only incidentally, prayer tends to increase our inner consistency and self-knowledge, which in turn improves our mental serenity.

It should be pointed out, however, with regard to introspection, that there is some conflict of purpose between verbal prayer and silent meditation. Their psychology differs. In the former, particularly in prayer of penitence, the mind may be stirred-up by verbose self-examination and self-reproach, sometimes in a frenzied manner; whereas, in the latter, based on inner silence, the mind is rather allowed to settle down, and naturally reach clarity and peace.

Excessive speech, in thought or orally, can sometimes take us far from true self-knowledge, when it attempts to force on us mental insight from the outside, as it were, by means of cliché ideas and labels. On the other hand, admittedly, silent meditation, whose usual effect is to make the mind more transparent to inner scrutiny and more honest, can occasionally dull the mind or make us blind to our faults through ego pride (although, even in such cases, if one continues meditating the shortcomings eventually fall away).

In fact, regular practice of silent meditation greatly enhances regular prayer because it calms and clarifies our mind and strengthens our immunity to internal and external distractions, increasing our capacity of attention and concentration so that we can more consciously and powerfully direct our thoughts and words towards God. Instead of merely reciting prayers, we get to mentally aim them heavenward. Silent meditation is practiced sitting down, in an erect and still (yet relaxed) posture, during at least half an hour at a time, at least once a day, and allowing the mind to gently and naturally settle down. If this is done not long before prayer, the effect on it is tangible. But even if done regularly at other times of the day or night, it makes a remarkable difference.

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This essay is currently published as a new chapter of Avi Sion's book *Theology*.

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