

1 Introduction

Not long ago, I was several hundred miles away from home, sitting on my sister's front porch. A hospice nurse just told me that my sister had only days left to live: the treatments that had served her well for the past few years had stopped working, and there was nothing medically left to do. (She would die two days later, as predicted.) I called my wife to tell her this terrible news and to ask her to join me right away. Before she could do that, she said, she needed to keep a medical appointment first.

My wife had completed extended treatments for breast cancer herself just a few years ago. She did not want to tell me that she had a medical appointment today because I was caring for my sister, but now she had to explain – the appointment was to investigate a new lump in her own breast.

My head started spinning with this news. For the next few hours, I would watch over my sister, work at my new job remotely, and wait for an update from my wife. Finally, she called to tell me that after two tests, the doctors concluded that there was nothing to worry about, and my sense of the world around me started to assume a more familiar shape.

While waiting to hear from my wife, I noticed that I felt drawn to pray for a good report for her, but I did not feel drawn to pray for my sister's recovery. What was the difference? If God could ensure that my wife did not have cancer again, why couldn't God heal my sister also? Does it make more sense to pray for things when it seems as if they might easily go one way or another but less sense to pray for them when the outcome seems determined or extremely unlikely? Why should anyone think that prayer could make a difference in terms of what God does in the first place?

These are some of the questions that have vexed philosophers over the centuries as they have thought carefully about petitionary prayer. In the pages that follow, I will explore the reasons people have offered for praying in the petitionary way, with special attention to recent philosophical work concerning these questions.

This recent work has tended to focus on three main questions. The first question is properly regarded as the classical problem of petitionary prayer: How can petitionary prayers make any difference to God? Very briefly, the worry is that petitionary prayers are either unnecessary (because God will do what is requested anyway because it is worth doing) or pointless (because God will not do what is requested because it is not worth doing). This question is addressed in Sections 3 and 4. The second question that is the focus of recent work concerning petitionary prayer involves epistemology: Could we ever know or reasonably believe that a given event was brought about by God as

an answer to petitionary prayer? This question is addressed in Section 5. The third question is more practical: What should people request in petitionary prayer? This question is addressed in Section 6.

2 Preliminary Considerations

In this section, I discuss some important questions that frame the discussion of the remainder of this Element. They are general questions about God, prayer, and providence. People who are already quite familiar with the philosophical debate concerning petitionary prayer could easily skip this section, and so could people who are not interested in some of the subtleties of the debate. It provides a substantial framework for posing the key questions in a precise way, and I will refer to terminology and distinctions introduced in this section later in the Element. But if you find yourself losing interest in this section, please jump ahead to Section 3 and return to this section only if you feel the need to clarify something.

It turns out that there are many philosophical questions one could ask about prayer. It would be impossible to address all of them adequately in a single discussion, let alone a short one like this. To narrow the focus, I will discuss only prayer addressed to a divine being who is like the one worshiped by monotheists from the most prominent theistic religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Most adherents of these religions believe that this God is absolutely perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness. But some philosophers and theologians have claimed that such a combination is impossible. I will not discuss those debates here. Instead, I will stipulate that when we talk about God, we mean a maximally excellent being who possesses the greatest possible combination of great-making qualities, whatever that turns out to be, and whether or not such a being actually exists.¹ I will refer to people who believe that such a God exists as *theists*.

I will not argue for or against the existence of God. For the sake of convenience, I will speak as if God exists, but questions about God and prayer are philosophically interesting whether or not this is true. None of my arguments will depend upon the assumption that God actually exists, and I will not assume that any particular religious practice or tradition has any advantage when it comes to understanding petitionary prayer philosophically.²

¹ See Nagasawa 2017 for a discussion of these debates, and a defense of this approach.

² As Caleb Cohoe has pointed out, though, different religious traditions might approach our central questions quite differently because they might rank the value of things in radically different ways; see the discussions of this question in Cohoe 2018 and a reply in Davison 2018.

There are many kinds of prayers that could be addressed to God. Some of them are designed to express beliefs and attitudes about God or God's actions, such as prayers of gratitude/thanks, adoration/praise, and lamentation/complaint. Others are designed to accomplish a change in one's relationship to God, such as prayers of confession or repentance. Finally, some prayers are designed to request something from God; I will call these petitionary prayers.³ Although the other kinds of prayers raise interesting philosophical questions too, by far the most debate among philosophers arises in connection with petitionary prayers, so they will be the central focus of this Element.⁴

One of the main questions in the philosophical debate about petitionary prayer to date is whether there are good reasons for offering such prayers. Everyone admits that petitionary prayers make some difference, at least with respect to the person offering the prayer (for better or worse). For example, offering petitionary prayers might lead to peace of mind, or gratitude, or a welcome sense of dependence upon God; on the other hand, the belief that God's action in the world depends upon one's petitionary prayers could also lead to excessive guilt and reinforce irrational beliefs about the degree of one's control over the world.⁵ But for philosophers of religion, the main question is usually whether petitionary prayers could make a difference to God's action in some sense. For example, are there things that God does in the world that God would not have done if petitionary prayers had not been offered for them?⁶

In offering petitionary prayers, people might request something from God that involves themselves, or another person or persons, or some other situation in the world. Such requests typically involve things in the future, but they can also involve things in the present or even in the past. In theory, petitionary prayers could even involve requests concerning eternal, necessary, or even impossible states of affairs – not even the sky is the limit, one might say.⁷

One way to frame the question about petitionary prayers making a difference to God involves the idea of God's reasons. Presumably, God has reasons for doing all sorts of things, some of them stronger than others. If there are things that are evil in themselves, for example, then presumably God has a conclusive

³ This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of types of prayers; for more discussion, see Davison 2017, chapter 2.

⁴ For more broad discussions of prayer in general, see Davison 2021b and 2021c.

⁵ For more on possible effects, see the discussions in Phillips 1981, Murray and Meyers 1994, and Davison 2009.

⁶ Here, I am bracketing off complicated issues about what it means for God to act in the world – philosophers of religion have a lot to say about this, but I cannot address those debates here. For a brief discussion of answered petitionary prayer and divine intervention, see Davison 2017, 14–16.

⁷ For more complete classification of types of petitionary prayers, see Davison 2017, chapter 2.

reason not to do them – God’s moral perfection is incompatible with granting requests that would involve God doing anything that is evil in itself.

There may also be connections between things that God has conclusive reasons not to break or connections between things that not even God can break. For instance, theists have typically thought that God has a providential plan for the world that is contingent, where this implies that God could have chosen a different one instead. There may also be things that are literally beyond God’s control. For example, theists have typically held that no matter how earnestly a person prays for God to make it false that $2 + 2 = 4$, there is nothing God can do about that – it’s a logical truth that could not be otherwise. Most theists have also thought that God cannot change the past – once something has happened, they would say, it cannot be undone.⁸

If we put together all of God’s reasons for making the world a certain way, is there any room left for petitionary prayers to make a difference in how things go? This is one way of framing the main question that has dominated contemporary philosophical debates about reasons for offering petitionary prayers. As I will use the term here, a *challenge* to petitionary prayer is an argument designed to show that the answer to this question is “no,” to explain why petitionary prayers cannot make a difference to God in some relevant sense. By contrast, a *defense* of petitionary prayer is designed to provide a possible explanation of how petitionary prayer might make a difference to God in some relevant sense.⁹

We can imagine different standards for success for challenges and defenses, respectively.¹⁰ Depending on what people think is at stake, they might have higher or lower standards for success. For example, a deeply skeptical nontheist might find the possible existence of God unwelcome in various ways¹¹ and so might demand very strong evidence for the possibility that petitionary prayers could be answered by God before even considering apparent cases of answered petitionary prayer. For such a person, a defense is not likely to be successful unless it explains clearly why God might make the provision of certain things dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayer over a wide range of realistic cases.

⁸ See the discussion of this in Adams and Kretzmann 1983. However, it may be possible for God to bring about something that is a response to a future petitionary prayer; for more on this, see Flint 1998, chapter 11, Timpe 2005, and Mawson 2007.

⁹ For a slightly different use of these terms, and a more complete discussion of examples of both challenges and defenses, see Davison 2017, 16–23.

¹⁰ Thanks to Scott Hill, Caleb Cohoe, and Daniel Howard-Snyder for suggesting the brief discussion of this question that follows.

¹¹ For a helpful collection of essays exploring the question of whether we should want God to exist or not, see Kraay 2020.

By contrast, a highly confident theist mind finds it unwelcome to consider the possibility that God does not or cannot answer petitionary prayers and so might demand very strong evidence for that conclusion. For such a person, a challenge is not likely to be successful unless it explains clearly why God would not (or could not) make the provision of certain things dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayers in clearly possible cases.

With respect to challenges, typically philosophers try to show that no petitionary prayers of any kind could or would be answered by God for various reasons. This is a very wide and sweeping conclusion. By contrast, with respect to defenses, typically philosophers try to show only that God has good reasons for making the provision of certain things dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayers in just some cases. In this respect, anyway, philosophers trying to provide a defense are engaged in an easier task than those trying to provide a challenge, all other things being equal. However, it makes sense to count a defense of petitionary prayer as *fully* successful only if it provides an explanation that makes sense of the full range of cases in which theists typically hold that petitionary prayers are appropriate. These include cases of petitionary prayer for one's own self or others, for the provision of some good thing or the prevention/removal of some bad thing, whether it be physical or spiritual, trivial or serious, and so on.

Given the wide range of possible criteria for success for defenses and challenges mentioned, it is difficult to speak in general terms about whether the arguments developed by philosophers with respect to petitionary prayer are successful. In the discussion that follows, out of necessity, I will typically ignore these differences for the sake of brevity. So when asking whether a defense is successful, I will be asking whether strong evidence has been provided for the conclusion that it would be reasonable for God to make the provision of things dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayers across the full range of cases in which theists typically believe that petitionary prayers should be offered. Of course, it is not easy to determine what counts as a good reason for God here – in part, that is why these questions are philosophical ones. Partial defenses are better than nothing, and perhaps it is possible to combine them; I will return to that question in Section 5.

By contrast, when asking whether a challenge is successful, I will be asking whether strong evidence has been provided for thinking that God could not or would not make the provision of anything dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayers. I will discuss some challenges in this section and then turn to defenses in Section 3. Typically, challenges to petitionary prayer appeal to God's goodness or God's knowledge. For instance, sometimes people argue that because God is perfectly good, God will provide what is best for everyone,

all the time, whether or not petitionary prayers are offered.¹² Such arguments sometimes generate questions similar to those that arise in connection with philosophical discussions of the problem of evil: Why does God permit bad things to happen in the world in the first place?

Here I think it is helpful to distinguish questions about the problem of evil in general from questions about why God might require petitionary prayers before providing certain things. Here is one way to explain the difference. Suppose that a certain person, Pat, has fallen ill. Without knowing anything more about the situation, we can distinguish several different possibilities concerning how petitionary prayers on Pat's behalf might relate to God's reasons for healing Pat:

- (1) For reasons that are independent of any petitionary prayers, God will heal Pat and would have done so whether or not any petitionary prayers were offered on Pat's behalf. (If this is the case, then petitionary prayer would make no difference with respect to Pat's healing.)
- (2) God will heal Pat if petitionary prayers are offered on Pat's behalf by certain persons in certain circumstances, but not otherwise. (If this is the case, petitionary prayer would make all the difference for Pat's healing.)
- (3) For reasons that are completely independent of any petitionary prayers, God will not heal Pat and would not have done so whether or not any petitionary prayers were offered on Pat's behalf. (If this is the case, then petitionary prayer would make no difference with respect to Pat's healing.)

There may be other possibilities here, too – I am not claiming that these are the only three. But we can identify at least these three. I am not suggesting that one of these three options holds in *every* case of illness – I am just saying that with respect to *Pat's* illness specifically, we can distinguish these three possibilities from the outset, and they clearly differ with respect to the difference that petitionary prayer would make.

Returning to the question raised earlier, we were trying to explain the difference between questions about the problem of evil in general and questions about why God might require petitionary prayers before providing certain things. With respect to these three possibilities involving Pat's illness, those who take up the problem of evil in general are trying to identify what God's reasons might be in cases like (3), where God has reasons for not healing Pat that God clearly lacks in cases like (1). By contrast, those who offer defenses of petitionary prayer are trying to identify what God's reasons might be in cases like (2). So

¹² For an example of an argument developed along these lines (roughly speaking), see Basinger 1983; for a more complete list of challenges to petitionary prayer from the history of philosophy, see Davison 2017, 16–21.

although these two questions are related to one another in interesting ways, and people often discuss them as if they are the same, they are logically distinct.¹³

In response to the challenge that petitionary prayer is pointless because God will provide what is best whether or not petitionary prayers are offered, some philosophers have argued that there are compelling reasons for God to make the provision of certain things dependent upon the offering of petitionary prayers; in a way, these possible explanations of God's reasons make up the bulk of the philosophical literature concerning petitionary prayer. I will discuss and evaluate most of these proposed defenses in some detail in Section 3.

At this point, it seems important to recognize that debates about petitionary prayer are logically independent of debates about whether or not human beings have freedom of choice. Although some defenses of petitionary prayer assume that created persons offer their petitionary prayers freely in some libertarian sense, which requires that they not be determined in what they do by factors beyond their control, not all defenses have this feature. Heath White, for instance, embraces Theological Determinism, which implies that humans never make free choices in any libertarian sense. But he argues that petitionary prayers sometimes make all the difference in terms of what God does in the world.¹⁴ This example illustrates a fascinating fact about philosophical debates concerning petitionary prayer: different people find it important to preserve very different things in their understanding of how petitionary prayer might make a difference to God.

Returning again to the question of challenges to petitionary prayer, another common kind of challenge appeals to the extent of God's knowledge of the future. This challenge involves arguing that petitionary prayers cannot make any difference in terms of what God does because God already knows the future, so there is no point in praying about it – either what you might request is already part of the future, or it is not, and either way, the prayer will make no difference. In order to explore this kind of challenge in some detail, it is necessary to discuss the main ways in which people understand God's knowledge of the future and how this relates to God's providential control over the world. Although I cannot describe adequately the complex debate over these views here, at least I can provide a summary of the main issues that philosophers debate in this area.

¹³ For additional discussion concerning the relationship between unanswered petitionary prayers and the problem of evil, see Taliaferro 2007, Veber 2007, Franks 2009, Davison 2017, chapter 6, and Mooney and Grafton-Cardwell (under review).

¹⁴ According to White, our prayers are final causes, not efficient causes, of divine action; see White 2019, 33–6. Here White is appealing to a taxonomy of causes that can be traced back to Aristotle; for more on this causal framework, see Falcon 2019.

According to the view called Open Theism, some things about the future are not determined yet, so not even God can know about them at the present time.¹⁵ Since they are libertarians about free will, which implies that they understand such choices to be not fully determined by prior conditions beyond an agent's control, Open Theists hold that these unknowable things include the future free choices of human beings. For example, the ancient philosopher Aristotle seems to have held that it is indeterminate today whether or not there will be a sea battle tomorrow – so many ships will pass by each other, and so many individual people will be making decisions based upon whom they encounter, that it is literally up in the air today whether or not a battle will break out tomorrow on the sea.¹⁶ That part of the future is open, we might say – things could go either way.

Open Theists note that God still knows everything that can be known, including all possibilities and probabilities concerning the future, so God has the most complete knowledge of the future possible. But they insist that God does not know exactly what human beings will freely do in the future. If our future petitionary prayers are free, or God's decision whether to answer such prayers is free (or both), then those things are undetermined until they happen, so petitionary prayer can make all the difference in the world – God's knowledge of the future does not threaten petitionary prayer at all, and the challenge can be answered easily.

Although Open Theism has become more popular than ever during the past thirty years or so, some people find it to be unacceptable as an account of divine providence. One reason often discussed in this connection is that since Open Theism denies that God knows the future in all of its detail, it suggests that God takes risks in creation, and some people find this idea objectionable.¹⁷

A very different approach to divine providence seems to avoid this objection, although it certainly has issues of its own. This second view is called the Middle Knowledge account.¹⁸ According to this approach, God knows the complete future in all of its detail as a result of inferring it logically from two other things: (1) exactly what would happen in any possible situation and (2) which situations will actually arise.¹⁹ For example, according to the Middle Knowledge view, God would know what each sailor would do in every circumstance, and God would know exactly which circumstances would arise tomorrow on the sea.

¹⁵ See Hasker 1989, Rissler 2006, and Borland 2017.

¹⁶ For a lively discussion of Aristotle's reasoning here, see Anscombe 1956.

¹⁷ I am not suggesting that this is a decisive objection to Open Theism, of course; for more on the debate here, see Hasker 1989, Flint 1998, Borland 2017, and Rissler 2017.

¹⁸ This approach is sometimes called "Molinism," after the sixteenth-century theologian Luis de Molina, who appears to have first clearly articulated this position.

¹⁹ See Flint 1998 and Molina 2004.

Based on this knowledge, God will be able to infer logically what each sailor will choose to do, even if those choices are free in some libertarian sense, so God will know today whether or not there will be a sea battle tomorrow. According to this view, even though God knows exactly what you will do in the future, it will still be up to you to decide what to do then – in fact, when you act freely, you have the ability to do something such that, if you were to do it, God would have always known something different about the future.²⁰

According to the Middle Knowledge approach, petitionary prayer can make all the difference because God knows prior to creating the world which prayers would be offered freely by which persons in which circumstances, so God can take this information into account from eternity when deciding what to create. The Middle Knowledge approach also helps to explain why God would decide not to answer certain petitionary prayers because God would also know what would happen if they were answered – and sometimes this might be very bad.²¹

Although the Middle Knowledge view is certainly a key player in the debate about divine providence, appearing to permit theists to have their cake and eat it too (by combining a robust picture of human freedom with a strong sense of divine control), some people find it unacceptable. One reason is that people doubt whether there are truths about what everyone and everything would do in every situation, and if there are, they wonder whether anyone (even God) could know them.²²

By contrast, the Timeless Eternity approach to divine knowledge appeals to the idea that God is outside of time altogether and sees all of history simultaneously from the perspective of eternity. According to this view, God does not really know *in advance* what will happen in the future because God is not located anywhere in time. To use an analogy from St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74 CE), imagine travelers moving through a valley in the middle of a line of wagons. They can see the wagon in front and the wagon behind, but nothing else. This is a limited view that corresponds to the perspective of persons in time. But now imagine someone on top of a nearby hill who can see the entire line of wagons at once. This all-encompassing view corresponds to the view of God from outside of time, who sees all of history at once from the point of view of eternity.²³

²⁰ This point is made in Flint 1998 – the most detailed and clearly articulated presentation of the Middle Knowledge view in the literature.

²¹ See the discussion of this possibility, with respect to Cuthbert and an iguana, in Flint 1998, chapter 10; also see the discussion of praying for things to have occurred in the past in Flint 1998, chapter 11.

²² See Hasker 1989, Davison 1991, Flint 1998, Zagzebski 2017, Borland 2017, and Rissler 2017.

²³ See Deng 2018.

The Timeless Eternity approach seems to have trouble with this challenge to petitionary prayer based upon divine knowledge of the future – if God sees from eternity what petitionary prayers people offer, God must also see from eternity everything else about the world, including what God does. It is hard to understand the idea of God responding to requests from the point of view of eternity because that idea seems to involve holding fixed the requests and then God choosing some response without already knowing what the response would be.

The problem here seems very similar to the problem that attaches to a different view of God’s knowledge that is often called the Simple Foreknowledge view. According to the Simple Foreknowledge view, God is not outside of time but foreknows the future in all of its detail, including those parts of the future that are not determined by past events, such as human free choices (understood in some libertarian sense). As a number of authors have pointed out, God’s knowledge of the future comes too late to make a difference – after all, the future is whatever will actually happen, not what might happen or could happen. Since God knows only what is actually going to be future on the Simple Foreknowledge view, and not what would have happened if things had been different, God cannot change the future in response to what God knows about it, and so cannot respond to petitionary prayers on the basis of simple foreknowledge about the future.²⁴

There is one more view of providence to consider here. It is called Theological Determinism. According to this approach, God knows the past, present, and future because God decides exactly how things will be, by determining them in every detail.²⁵ Because God completely determines that people will offer various petitionary prayers at various times, God can also decide whether and how to answer them. People tend to object to Theological Determinism in many of the same ways that they object to other kinds of determinism, by asking how it makes sense to attribute moral responsibility to created agents if God exercises complete control over creation; they also wonder whether Theological Determinism generates an insoluble version of the problem of evil that undercuts the claim that God is morally perfect.²⁶

²⁴ This argument is a matter of some controversy; see the discussions of this question in Hasker 1989 and Flint 1998, along with more recent debates in Pruss 2007, Hasker 2009, and Hunt 2009.

²⁵ Theological Determinism is neutral on the question of whether God is outside of time; for more on this view of providence, see Furlong 2019 and White 2019.

²⁶ For further discussion, see Frankfurt 1969, Van Inwagen 1983, Dennett 1984, Wolf 1990, Fischer and Ravizza 1998, Kane 1998, Pereboom 2001, 2014, Watson 2003, Timpe 2013, Timpe and Speak 2016, and Ekstrom 2021. For additional discussions focused on the nature of divine freedom, see Van Inwagen 1983, 2006, Wierenga 2002, Mawson 2005, Bergmann and Cover 2006, Talbott 2009, Timpe 2013, and White 2019.