

## Prayers for the past

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**Abstract:** All three of the world's major monotheistic religions traditionally affirm that petitionary prayers can be causally efficacious in bringing about certain states of affairs. Most of these prayers are offered before the state of affairs that they are aimed at helping bring about. In the present paper, I explore the possibility of whether petitionary prayers for the past can also be causally efficacious. Assuming an incompatibilist account of free will, I examine four views in philosophical theology (simple foreknowledge, eternalism, Molinism, and openism) and argue that the first three have the resources to account for the efficacy of past-directed prayers, while the latter does not. I further suggest that on those views which affirm the possible efficacy of past-directed petitionary prayers, such prayers can be 'impetratory' even if the agent already knows that the desired state of affairs has obtained.

### Introduction

Consider the following scenario. Allison is an agent with libertarian free will. While watching the evening news, she learns that there is currently a tornado touching down in western Ohio, leaving a path of devastation and destruction in its wake. Allison's father lives in the path of the storm. As she runs to the phone to call him, she offers a prayer that he not be hurt or killed by the tornado. Allison thinks that God might hear her prayer and, as a result, intervene in such a way as to protect her father from harm.<sup>1</sup>

Scenarios such as this are common, wherein a person petitions God to bring about a certain state of affairs. All three of the world's major monotheistic religions affirm that petitionary prayers can be causally efficacious in bringing about certain states of affairs. Dealing with petitionary prayer from a Christian perspective, David Basinger distinguishes three senses in which petitionary prayer can be causally efficacious.

- (1) Petitionary prayer can beneficially affect the petitioner herself.

- (2) Petitionary prayer can beneficially affect people who are aware that petitions are being made on their behalf.
- (3) Petitionary prayer affects whether or not God directly intervenes in the world.<sup>2</sup>

While I do not intend to downplay the significance of the first two ways in which a petitionary prayer might be causally efficacious, it is only the third of these three senses that presently concerns me.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in what follows, I will leave aside the ways in which petitionary prayer affects either the one praying or those who are aware that prayers are being offered on their behalf, concentrating only on issues related to the third sense of a prayer's efficaciousness.

Basinger elaborates the third way that prayer can be causally efficacious as follows: 'God has granted us the power to decide whether to request his assistance and ... at times the decision we make determines whether we receive the help desired ... . Divine activity is at times dependent on our freely offered petitions.'<sup>4</sup> According to Basinger, the heart of the Christian's belief in petitionary prayer is the belief that 'they ask him to bring about some state of affairs which they believe may not occur without divine intervention'.<sup>5</sup> Peter Geach makes a similar claim regarding petitionary prayer when he says that 'Christians, who rely on the word of their Master, are confident that some prayer is impetratory: that God gives us some things, not only *as* we wish, but *because* we wish.'<sup>6</sup> Let us call a petitionary prayer 'impetratory' if God's granting of the petition is due, at least in part, to the petition offered.

Returning to the scenario described above, then, let us say that Allison's prayer for her father is impetratory if God keeps him from harm at least in part as a result of her prayer. As I mentioned above, many theists think that such situations are relatively common. But let us slightly change the details of the story. Consider then the following modified scenario. Allison is watching the morning news, and learns that a tornado touched down in western Ohio the previous evening, leaving a path of devastation and destruction in its wake. The news anchor reports that seventeen homes were destroyed by the tornado, and that one individual was killed. Allison's father lives in the area affected by the storm. As she runs to the phone to call him, she offers a prayer that he may not have been the one killed in the tornado. Even though she knows that the state of affairs she is praying about is already in the past, and that thus it is already a fact whether or not her father was killed, Allison thinks that her prayer might be efficacious in the same way that prayers for future states of affairs can be.

The difference between Allison's prayer in the original scenario and her prayer in the modified scenario has to do with the temporal relationship between the offering of the prayer and the state of affairs the prayer is aimed at helping to bring about. The former, or 'future-directed' prayers, are more familiar to us; these are the sorts of petitions that many religious individuals make on a regular

basis. And most philosophers of religion are willing to grant that such prayers can be impetratory.<sup>7</sup> But what of prayers similar to the one in the modified scenario? What are we to make of ‘past-directed’ prayers in which the prayer is offered at a time later than the state of affairs it petitions God to bring about? It is clearly possible for a person to pray such a prayer. But the question regarding whether such a prayer can be impetratory still remains. If we take the similarities between the two scenarios seriously, we might be tempted to think that both prayers are impetratory. However, we may be hesitant to think that prayers for the past can be impetratory for reasons dealing with the direction of time and causal chains. Can we make sense of past-direction impetrations without having to embrace backward causation?

Let us call prayers such as Allison’s prayer in the modified scenario ‘past-directed impetratory prayers’, or PIPs.<sup>8</sup> Such prayers are ‘past-directed’ insofar as they are prayers aimed at bringing about a state of affairs that is already past for the one praying; they will be impetratory if they contribute to God bringing about the state of affairs petitioned for. Let us define PIPs as follows:

PIP =<sub>df</sub> A petitionary prayer that meets the following four criteria:

- (i) the prayer is offered by an agent A at time  $t_2$ ;
- (ii) the prayer requests that God bring about some state of affairs S at time  $t_1$  (where  $t_1$  is prior to  $t_2$ );
- (iii) the prayed-for state of affairs S is brought about by God, at least in part, as a result of A’s prayer; that is, God’s knowledge of A’s prayer is one of the reasons He has for bringing S about; and
- (iv) God desires to bring about S only if A prays for S, such that if A does not pray for S, then God will not bring it about.<sup>9</sup>

What is one to make of PIPs? Can such prayers exist?

The first thing to note is that, despite the intuition that a response needs to follow a request if the response is to be a result of the request, there is some reason to think that this intuition is in fact false. If the intuition were to turn out to be true, then it would be impossible for PIPs to be efficacious. But is such an intuition really true? Eleonore Stump, for one, thinks that it is false, even for human agents. To see this, she asks us to consider the following example:

If at 3 o’clock, a mother prepares a snack for her little boy because she believes that when he gets home at 3.30 he will ask for one, it does not seem unreasonable to describe her as preparing the food because of the child’s request, even though in this case the response is earlier than the request.<sup>10</sup>

Later in this paper, I give reason for thinking that mere belief about the future (even if such belief happens to be true) is not enough to save the sort of responsiveness needed for impetratory prayers. However, I think that the moral of Stump’s story can be salvaged if the mother not only *believes* that the child

will make the request, but if she also *knows* that he will.<sup>11</sup> And, according to many views in philosophical theology, God does have such knowledge of what free agents will do.

The second thing to notice is that a PIP is not a request that God *now* do something about the past. The advocate of PIPs need not join Descartes in thinking that God can change the past once it has come about.<sup>12</sup> Rather, past-directed prayers, as I understand them, are requests for God to *have done* something at a time prior to the time of the prayer.<sup>13</sup> As Gerald Taylor puts the point,

Any present prayer that our son *has not* drowned must be interpreted as a prayer that he *should not have* drowned two hours earlier if the logical absurdities of changing the past are to be avoided. When we pray that he *has* survived the disaster, what we ask is that our son *was* not drowned two hours ago, that he *was* able to reach a lifeboat, and perhaps that he *is* on a lifeboat at this very moment. We do not ask that God *now* make our son *to have been* on a lifeboat, or *now* set in motion a chain of events which will culminate in our son *having reached* a lifeboat two hours earlier. For any prayer which asks that something *now* be done with respect to the past is necessarily self-contradictory, and thus incoherent.<sup>14</sup>

What this quotation from Taylor shows us is that PIPs are not obviously incoherent in the way that one might initially think. But this is not enough to establish the claim that PIPs *are* coherent. There may be other reasons to reject such prayers.

In this paper, I aim to show how certain views in philosophical theology can intelligibly defend the existence of PIPs. I am not the first to have done so. For example, in his treatment of the relationship between prayer and providence at the end of *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis writes:

The event [in question] has already been decided – in a sense it was decided ‘before all worlds’. But one of the things taken into account in deciding it, and therefore one of the things that really cause it to happen, may be this very prayer that we are now offering. Thus, shocking as it may sound, I conclude that we can now at noon become part causes of an event occurring at ten o’clock [in the morning] ... My free act [of prayer] contributes to the cosmic shape. That contribution is made in eternity or ‘before all worlds’; but my consciousness of contributing reaches me at a particular point in the time-series.<sup>15</sup>

I will further show how one’s view regarding PIPs depends on other issues in philosophical theology, namely the mode of God’s knowledge of human free actions and the related issue of God’s relationship to time. It should be noted that I am in no way commenting on either the intelligibility or plausibility of the views of God and His knowledge I deal with below. I am instead interested in whether these views can make sense of PIPs on their own terms. Of course, if any of these views are incoherent or false (as some have claimed), then it does not matter if they can make sense of PIPs. But the latter, not the former, is my concern in this

paper. However, before I turn my attention to these matters, I first address a general objection raised against PIPs that is claimed to be independent of these issues.

### **Geach's objection**

In *God and the Soul*, Peter Geach defends the claim that petitionary prayers can be impetratory. But he does not think that past-directed prayers can be. He considers C. S. Lewis's defence of PIPs mentioned above. Geach correctly captures the thrust of Lewis's position: 'Lewis argues that God timelessly sees the whole pattern of events in time and the whole pattern is subject to God's will: so God can shape an event that comes earlier to fit in with a prayer that comes later.'<sup>16</sup> However, according to Geach, to say of a prayer that 'God brought about situation S because of X's prayer' is incompatible with the claim that 'God would have brought about situation S regardless of X's praying or not praying'.<sup>17</sup> As we saw above, to affirm that God brought about S because of the petition in question is simply to say that the petition was impetratory. And if S would not have come about had X not prayed, then it must be the case, Geach thinks, that S is contingent: 'if we are to be justified in saying that a state of affairs S came about from somebody's impetratory prayer, then at the time of the prayer S must have had two-way contingency: it could come about, it could also not come about'.<sup>18</sup> So far, so good.

However, Geach immediately continues that 'the first and most obvious conclusion from this is that there can be no impetratory prayer in regard to things already past at the time of the prayer'.<sup>19</sup> It looks, then, like Geach has something of the following sort in mind. Since S is two-way contingent, that is, it either could come about or not, it is not possible for the time of S to be prior to the time of the prayer. But how exactly is Geach using the notion of 'two-way contingency' in this argument? When Geach first introduces the term, it sounds as if he might be using it as it is standardly employed in contemporary metaphysics: a state of affairs is contingent if and only if it is included in some possible worlds and precluded by others. But the contingency of a state of affairs, thus understood, is unaffected by whether or not that state of affairs has already been realized. So Geach must have something else in mind. Perhaps we can infer how he understands the contingency at issue from what else he says. He writes, 'It is irrelevant that a past issue was contingent, if we know that it is now decided and there is no longer any contingency about it.'<sup>20</sup>

As I mentioned above, the contingency of a state of affairs, as standardly understood in terms of possible worlds, is not affected by its time. If a state of affairs was contingent, then it remains so. What then does Geach mean by 'contingent'? I think one can see the answer to this question by taking seriously the idea implicit in Geach's statement that there can be a state of affairs that

*was* contingent but no longer *is* contingent. Thus, we might think that a state of affairs is contingent at a time  $t$  only if there is something that can be done at (or after)  $t$  to either bring it about or to prevent its being brought about. This understanding of contingency is to be contrasted with what is often referred to as either accidental necessity, necessity *per accidens* or temporal necessity. What Geach needs for his objection to PIPs, though, is not merely that  $S$ , the prayed for state of affairs, is not necessary in the strict sense, but also the stronger claim that  $S$  must not be accidentally necessary at the time of the request. However, if this is what Geach intends, then it is hard to see how he is not merely begging the question against the possibility of PIPs rather than arguing against their possibility.<sup>21</sup>

One might hope for help from Geach's further comment that 'the contingency of what we may sensibly pray for arises because it is foolish to try and obtain by prayer what is either impossible or inevitable'.<sup>22</sup> The question then becomes whether Geach is using 'impossible' and 'inevitable' synonymously. If he is, then the state of affairs prayed for will be neither, since, as shown above, the state of affairs will not be impossible in virtue of its being contingent. On the other hand, if Geach does think there is a difference between the two, it is hard to figure out what it is. Consider an analogous case regarding the future. He cannot mean inevitable to be that 'whatever will happen will happen', since that is tautologically true and of no help to his argument. Even if whatever will happen will happen, this does not mean that whatever will happen *must* happen. Likewise, to say of the past that it is inevitable is only to say that the past *is* what it is, not that it *must have been* the way it is. Thus, I conclude that Geach's objection to PIPs fails. There is no reason at this point to think that PIPs are impossible. Of course, not having a reason to think something impossible does not entail that it is possible. In the following sections, I try to show how PIPs are possible according to various views regarding God's knowledge and His relation to the world.

### **Simple foreknowledge**

Let us start with what I take to be the easiest case. One view in philosophical theology holds that God is a temporal being and necessarily has complete and infallible foreknowledge of all future events, including the actions of free agents, and that He uses this knowledge to exercise His providential control over creation. Let us call this the 'simple-foreknowledge' view.<sup>23</sup> So, for example, God knows at  $t_1$  that Allison will freely do some action at  $t_2$  (where  $t_2$  is later than  $t_1$ ), such as decide to adopt a puppy from the animal shelter.<sup>24</sup> According to the simple-foreknowledge view, it is in virtue of what Allison will do at  $t_2$  that God has true beliefs prior to  $t_2$  about Allison and her action at  $t_2$ .

If this is the case, then it is easy to see how the simple-foreknowledge view can account for PIPs. Suppose that Allison prays at time  $t_2$  that God bring about some state of affairs  $S$  at time  $t_1$ . As we saw before, this need not be understood as supposing that God, at  $t_2$ , brings it about that  $S$  occurred at an earlier time  $t_1$ , which would require genuine backward causation. Rather, the defender of PIPs can grant that the past is now unalterable if we understand the situation as one in which God knows at or prior to  $t_1$ , via His foreknowledge, that Allison will make the petition in question at  $t_2$  and, on the basis of this knowledge, decides to intervene in the world and bring about  $S$  at  $t_1$ . As Geoffrey Brown notes,

Causation is, of course, normally understood as a transitive relation, and so it is true that in this case  $P$  at  $t$  was a case of  $S$  at  $t_1$ . But the way in which this is brought about (via the foreknowledge of God) is such that, provided we can accept the credibility of divine foreknowledge, there is less oddity in this account than in one which introduces 'direct' backward causation.<sup>25</sup>

If agents like Allison have libertarian freedom and God has foreknowledge of their free actions, then agents like Allison have counterfactual power over God's beliefs. Suppose again that Allison does some action  $A$  at  $t_2$ . As we have seen, according to the simple-foreknowledge view, God knows at  $t_1$  that Allison will do  $A$  at  $t_2$ . But what if, contrary to our assumption, Allison does not do  $A$  at  $t_2$ ? In such a scenario, it is not the case that Allison at  $t_2$  would have caused God to have a false belief at  $t_1$ . This would be impossible, for if God is essentially omniscient, as the proponents of the simple-foreknowledge view traditionally assume, then God cannot have false beliefs. Rather, Allison would have caused God to have (at  $t_1$ ) different beliefs than He actually had (again, at  $t_1$ ). Given her libertarian freedom, Allison could have done something such that, had she done it, God would have had different beliefs than He actually did have.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as the proponent of the simple-foreknowledge view is committed to free agents having counterfactual power over certain of God's beliefs, she can use this power to explain the efficacy of PIPs.<sup>27</sup>

However, even granting counterfactual power over God's beliefs, there may be a worry lurking nearby.<sup>28</sup> Let us assume that state of affairs  $S$  obtained at  $t_1$ . If Allison does not pray at  $t_2$  that God bring about  $S$ , then  $S$  cannot be the result of God granting Allison's prayer. But if God knows at  $t_1$  that Allison will offer the prayer in question, is Allison's future prayer impetratory? One might think that, since  $S$  has already obtained, it does not matter whether or not Allison offers the prayer. This, however, does not necessarily follow. Since we are assuming that God has foreknowledge of what Allison will do at  $t_2$ , whether her prayer will be impetratory given that  $S$  obtained at  $t_1$  depends on whether the following conditional is true:

- (4) If it was not the case that Allison would offer the prayer at  $t_2$ , then God would not have brought about  $S$  at  $t_1$ .

If (4) is false, and God would have brought about S regardless of what Allison will do at  $t_2$ , then even if she does offer the prayer, it fails to satisfy criterion (iv) of PIPs given above. In such a case, Allison's prayer is indeed irrelevant to the obtaining of S. However, on the other hand, if (4) is true, then God only brought about S because of what Allison would do in the future, and her prayer could still be impetratory. Like her counterfactual power over God's beliefs, if we assume that S has already obtained, Allison has counterfactual power over whether God brings about S because of her impetratory prayer or for another reason. But her having this additional sort of counterfactual power is no more objectionable than the type of counterfactual power required for the simple-foreknowledge view to be true in the first place.

This presentation of the simple-foreknowledge view is brief and incomplete, and I have not attempted to defend the view from various objections that have been raised to it in the literature. What I have shown is how this view, if coherent, can explain the efficacy of PIPs. If God has foreknowledge of free agents' future actions, then one can defend the claim that God brought about a state of affairs in the past relative to the petitioner partly as a result of her petition.

### **Eternalism**

The second position in philosophical theology I want to consider is what I will call 'eternalism'. Unlike the simple-foreknowledge view, which asserts that God is a temporal being, the hallmark of eternalism is the claim that God is an atemporal being, outside of time as well as space. Eternalism is the view implicit in C. S. Lewis's discussion of PIPs mentioned earlier. Speaking of God, Lewis writes that 'To Him all the physical events and all the human acts are present in an eternal Now'.<sup>29</sup> Classically defended by, among others, Boethius and Aquinas, eternalism holds that God has 'the complete possession all at once of illimitable life'.<sup>30</sup> Since an eternal entity is atemporal, there is no past or future *within* the life of such an entity; nor can any temporal event or entity be past or future with respect to such a life. Nevertheless, an eternal being can have knowledge of temporal entities. As Aquinas puts the point, 'God's vision is measured by eternity, which is all at once; consequently, all times and everything done in them is subject to his sight.'<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Aquinas claims that God knows things that for us are future in the same way that He knows things that for us are past: both are equally present to God in his eternity. 'From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.'<sup>32</sup> While a full treatment of eternalism is beyond the scope of the present paper, there is one objection to eternalism that, if sound, would render prayer to an atemporal, and thus simple, God irrelevant.

One might think that if God is atemporal, then it is impossible for Him to interact with temporal entities. But if it is impossible for God to interact with

temporal entities, then God cannot respond to a petitionary prayer made by a temporal entity. Eleonore Stump, in her insightful article on petitionary prayer, considers this sort of objection in a particularly poignant way:

Before a certain petitionary prayer is made, it is the case either that God will bring about the state of affairs requested in the prayer or that he will not bring it about. He cannot have left the matter open since doing so would imply a subsequent change in him and he is immutable. Either way, since he is immutable, the prayer itself can effect no change in the state of affairs and hence is pointless.<sup>33</sup>

Walter Wink raises the same objection in this manner:

Before that unchangeable God, whose whole will was fixed from all eternity, intercession is ridiculous. There is no place for intercession with a God whose will is incapable of change. What Christians have too long worshiped is the God of Stoicism, to whose immutable will we can only surrender ourselves, conforming our wills to the unchangeable will of deity.<sup>34</sup>

If this objection holds, then the eternity and subsequent immutability of God would entail that God *cannot* respond to petitionary prayers. Defenders of eternalism, however, think that this sort of objection to their view misses the mark. Aquinas, for example, clearly held that God was both atemporal and simple, yet maintained that not all petitionary prayer is done in vain,<sup>35</sup> and Stump has discussed the flaw in this objection at length.<sup>36</sup>

Assuming then that the defender of eternalism is correct that it is possible for an eternal and simple God to respond to temporal beings, eternalism can also account for PIPs. Consider a scenario characterized as follows:

- (i) Allison prays at  $t_2$  that God bring about state of affairs S at time  $t_1$ .
- (ii) God is eternal in the ways described above.
- (iii) God is nevertheless able to respond to prayers offered by temporal agents.
- (iv) In this case, God is both willing and able to bring about S at time  $t_1$ , and does so in response to Allison's prayer at  $t_2$ .<sup>37</sup>
- (v) Had Allison not prayed at  $t_2$ , God would not have brought about S at  $t_1$ .

(ii) and (iii) will be true if eternalism is true and if the position has the resources to respond to the objection raised earlier. (iv) and (v) are possibly true if there are impetratory prayers, and will be true if the prayer at issue is, in fact, an impetratory prayer. Like me here stipulate that (iv) and (v), as well as (i), are true. It seems that (i) through (v) jointly establish that Allison has impetrated an eternal and simple God. But, if this is the case, notice that these five characterizations say nothing about the temporal relationship between  $t_2$  (the time of Allison's prayer) and  $t_1$  (the time of the prayed-for state of affairs). While  $t_2$  could be prior to  $t_1$  (with the implication that the prayer is a future-directed impetration), on the assumption of divine eternity, no contradiction or absurdity

is introduced by the temporal priority of  $t_1$  over  $t_2$ . As with the simple-foreknowledge view, eternalism can account for the efficacy of PIPs.

### **Molinism**

The next position in philosophical theology to consider is Molinism. Molinism has been the subject of much scholarship in the philosophy of religion in the past few decades. Molinism, most generally, is an attempt to explain how it is that God can retain providential control over a creation that contains libertarian free agents. So, for example, suppose that God, as part of His providential plan, wants Allison to perform a particular action, X. If Allison is free in the way described by libertarians, then how can God make sure that she freely does X? According to Molinists, the answer is found in God's middle knowledge (*scientia media*), more specifically in His knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, or CCFs. A CCF is a statement about what a free creature would freely do in a particular situation, such as the following:

- (5) If in circumstance C, Allison will freely do action X.

So in order to be assured that Allison will freely do X, God must simply make sure that she is in circumstance C. It is via this knowledge of true CCFs that Molinists explain the compatibility of creaturely freedom and divine governance. God can ensure that Allison does X without violating her freedom by seeing to it that she finds herself in C.

With this overview of Molinism in mind, it should be apparent how the Molinist will account for petitionary prayers for the past. Thomas P. Flint develops a Molinist account of PIPs in his book *Divine Providence*. Flint claims there that prayers for past events are defensible because the counterfactuals based upon them are eternally true (or false) and known to God via His middle knowledge. Modifying Flint's example to accord with the case of Allison used in this paper, consider Allison's situation when she hears the news report of the tornado near her father's house the night before. Allison is uncertain whether her father was hurt, or even killed, by the tornado. Let us again call the state of affairs that is Allison's father being unhurt by the tornado, S. Let us further assume that S obtains, that is, that her father was not hurt in the storm. And while there are many factors that might influence Allison's decision to pray for her father – such as her love for him, her desire to spend the next holiday with him – if Allison is in fact uncertain as to his current health, then it cannot be among her motivations for praying. In other words, even if S had not obtained, there is no reason to think that her decision to pray would have been any different.

It looks then like some parts of the circumstances Allison finds herself in are relevant to her decision to pray for her father's safety, while others are not. Let us call those parts of the circumstances that are counterfactually relevant

to Allison's decision to pray, R. R will include, among other things, her belief in a God that listens and responds to prayers, her love for her father, etc. Members of R are those parts of the circumstances that 'it is reasonable to think that her activity wouldn't have been exactly the same had they not been present'.<sup>38</sup> Let us call those parts of the circumstances that are *not* counterfactually relevant to Allison's free decision, T. Members of T might include the fact that Allison is currently wearing a green striped shirt, or the fact that her dog is currently sleeping on her bed, or the fact that Franklin Pierce was the fourteenth president of the United States. T will include lots of states of affairs. But on the assumption that Allison is unaware that her father is currently safe, that is, that she is unaware of S, presumably S will also be a member of T, rather than R.

The conjunction of R and T is then the complete circumstance in which Allison finds herself. Let us assume that in this complete circumstance, Allison decides to pray for the safety of her father. In other words, let us assume that the following CCF is true:

- (6) [(Allison is in R) and T]  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father.

Since the conjunction of R and T is the complete circumstance Allison is in, (6) is a CCF and, if true, would be known by God via His middle knowledge. If, as we assumed above, T includes all those circumstances that make no difference to her decision to pray, the following condition will also be true:

- (7) [(Allison is in R) and  $\sim$ T]  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father.

Like (6), (7) is also an element of God's middle knowledge. (6) and (7) together entail:

- (8) (Allison is in R)  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father.

Since (8) is a contingent truth entailed by two elements of God's middle knowledge, it too is something that God knows via His middle knowledge. Thus,

- (9) [(Allison is in R)  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father]  $\Leftrightarrow$  God has middle knowledge that [(Allison is in R)  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father].

But (8) also entails that

- (10) (Allison is in R)  $\rightarrow$  [(Allison is in R)  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father].

(9) and (10) together entail that:

- (11) Allison prays in R  $\rightarrow$  [God has middle knowledge that (Allison is in R  $\rightarrow$  Allison prays for the safety of her father)].

In other words, if it is in fact true, as we have been assuming, that Allison prays in R, then God knows via His middle knowledge that she would so pray

if in R. And if God has such knowledge, then assuming that He knows that Allison will be in R, He can use that knowledge of the true counterfactual expressed by (10) to bring about the safety of Allison's father as a result of her future prayer.<sup>39</sup>

### **Openism**

The final position I want to consider is called 'open theism' or 'openism'.<sup>40</sup> As others have noted, however, this is a very misleading title because perhaps the most distinctive tenet of the view is not a claim directly about either God or His attributes, but rather about the existence or nonexistence of certain true propositions.<sup>41</sup> The view is *not* the claim, as some of its opponents would suggest, that there are truths that God does not know, such as what Allison will do fifty years from now. Rather, the view is a claim that neither of the following propositions is now true:

- (12) Allison will freely do A fifty years from now.
- (13) Allison will freely refrain from doing A fifty years from now (either by doing something other than A or by doing nothing at all).

If neither of these propositions is now true, then it is not a limitation of God's omniscience to say that He does not know which one is true, much in the same way that it is not a limitation of God's omnipotence that He cannot do something that is logically impossible to do (again, Descartes' view notwithstanding). As such, the view presently under consideration is a view about what there is to be known; the view is thus compatible with the traditional understanding of omniscience according to which God knows all and only true propositions.

According to openism, God is a temporal being and knows at a particular time, via His omniscience, all and only the propositions that are true at that time. Let us say that a presently contingent future proposition is a proposition about the future whose truth-value is not determined by any presently existing objects, states of affairs, or events. Cases of agents' free actions in the future will be examples of such presently contingent future propositions.<sup>42</sup> Since presently contingent future propositions do not *now* have a determinate truth-value, such propositions are not among the objects of God's knowledge.

How does one understand petitionary prayers on the model of openism? That agents like Allison are presently making petitions, or have made petitions in the past, is something that God can know and use in His providential control of the world. So some prayers could be impetratory. But what of PIPs? Along the lines of openism, Terence Penelhum suggests perhaps past-oriented prayers can be impetratory:

In giving men freedom of choice, God makes it genuinely *uncertain* what they will do, and in consequence (since men's actions are uncertain before they happen) even He

does not know what their actions will be before they do them. Yet the fact that Jones's doing A rather than B is never *certain* before it happens does not show that his doing A is *no more likely* than his doing B before it happens. If this is true, there is nothing absurd about the suggestion that the laws of nature incorporate answers to likely prayers. And since it seems necessarily true that more likely things happen than unlikely ones, we have a good reason for expecting that a majority of likely prayers will in fact be offered and can thus be provided for.<sup>43</sup>

Penelhum, like the openist, thinks that the most God can know of future actions is the probability of their occurrence.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Penelhum thinks that this knowledge is sufficient for God to be responsive to prayers. Unfortunately such a suggestion will not work for an account of past-directed prayers.

Consider the case that God knows at  $t_1$  that it is likely that Allison will pray at  $t_2$  for God to bring about a state of affairs, S. Let us further suppose that God does bring about S at  $t_1$ . On the chance (no matter how miniscule) that Allison does not make the petition at  $t_2$ , then God could not have brought about S, even in part, because of Allison's prayer, since there is no such prayer. Furthermore, even if Allison does make the petition in question, God could not have brought about S, even in part, because of her petition at  $t_2$ , because prior to  $t_2$  there was no fact of the matter about what she would do at  $t_2$ , and condition (iii) of the definition of PIPs is violated.

Thus, if God is a temporal being, and if one rejects God having foreknowledge of the future (either through having simple foreknowledge or through the conjunction of His middle knowledge and creative act) as the openist does, then it appears that one cannot defend the efficacy of PIPs. The most that can be said is that God brings about state of affairs S because of His belief that an agent *might* or *probably* or *in all likelihood* will pray at some point in the future that God bring S about. Insofar as this fails to meet the definition of PIPs given above, openism cannot account for the efficacy of past-directed impetratory prayers.

### **A further implication**

Gerald Taylor objects to a defence of PIPs given by Michael Dummett as follows:

The problem which Dummett faces is that he is unable to explain how the casual efficacy of a present retrospective prayer becomes located in the past ... . On Dummett's analysis, we must simply accept, without any hope of explanation, the fact that the causal efficacy of a present retrospective prayer is located in the past.<sup>45</sup>

I have argued in the previous pages that a number of views in philosophical theology can account for PIPs, and have shown how such prayer can be causally efficacious in a way that presumably Taylor thinks Dummett has not. Whether a view can account for such prayers depends on its understanding of God's knowledge of free actions, which in turn is related to God's relationship to time.

Such a conclusion will, no doubt, strike many as peculiar. Nevertheless, I think that the above discussion is also suggestive of what many will take to be an even more startling claim. Most defenders of PIPs restrict PIPs to cases where the praying agent does not know what the outcome of the state in question is. That is, Allison does not know at time  $t_2$  (the time of the prayer) whether or not S obtained earlier at  $t_1$ . Eleonore Stump, for example, only wants to consider PIPs where the praying agent does not know whether God has already brought about the state of affairs in question.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Flint writes that ‘where we are genuinely unsure whether the prayed-for event occurs, though, praying often seems appropriate, whether the event be in the future or in the past ... . Of course, were we certain concerning the occurrence of the past event in question, things might be different.’<sup>47</sup> But it seems to me that the above discussion gives us reason to question this limitation. Might it not be possible for a prayer for the past to be efficacious in whatever way petitionary prayers are even if the agent knows that the outcome for which she is praying has already happened? Can Allison’s prayer for her father only be efficacious if she does not know whether he was hurt or not? What if she instead already knows his status?

There is clearly one sense in which it does not make sense to pray for the past if one already knows how it turned out: cases where one knows that the desired state of affairs has not obtained. C. S. Lewis approached this topic in this way:

If we can reasonably pray for an event which must in fact have happened or failed to happen several hours ago, why can we not pray for an event which we know *not* to have happened? e.g. pray for the safety of someone who, as we know, was killed yesterday. What makes the difference is precisely our knowledge. The known event states God’s will. It is psychologically impossible to pray for what we know to be unobtainable; and if it were possible the prayer would sin against the duty of submission to God’s known will.<sup>48</sup>

I am less certain than Lewis is as to what is ‘psychologically impossible’ for us to do. Such a prayer would definitely be irrational (though, I would note, we do lots of irrational things). Stump has similarly described such a prayer as absurd: ‘It is obviously absurd to pray in 1980 that Napoleon win at Waterloo when one knows what God does not bring about at Waterloo.’<sup>49</sup> Regardless of whether it is possible for an agent to make such a prayer, what is clear to me is that it is not possible for such a prayer to be impetratory. Consider the following situation: at  $t_2$ , Allison is deliberating whether to petition God to bring about some state of affairs SA at  $t_1$ . If Allison knows that S did not obtain, then she should also know that her prayer for S, should she decide to make it, cannot be impetratory. If God does not bring about S, then *a fortiori* He did not bring about S as a result of Allison’s prayer. So a prayer for a previous state of affairs S cannot be impetratory if one knows that S did not obtain.

But what about cases where the state of affairs Allison is considering petitioning for ‘tracks’, so to speak, what she knows already occurred? Can Allison’s prayer that God bring about S help bring about S even if she knows that S already happened? Again, Stump suggests that such a prayer would be absurd: ‘The only appropriate version of that prayer is “Let Napoleon have lost at Waterloo”, and for one who knows the outcome of the battle more than a hundred and fifty years ago, that prayer is pointless and in that sense absurd.’<sup>50</sup> Stump, I believe, is mistaken here. Why think that a prayer that otherwise would have not been pointless is made to be so simply by the addition of the praying subject’s knowledge that the result was already granted?

To see that such a prayer could be impetratory, consider again the simple-foreknowledge view. Assume that Allison will pray at  $t_2$  that her father be spared from the tornado at  $t_1$ . Given His omniscience, God knows this prior to  $t_2$  and can thus bring about the safety of her father at  $t_1$ . So long as Allison prays that God bring about S, and God is able and willing to bring about S, then it does not matter whether or not Allison already knows that S obtained (that is, so long as what God foreknows is that Allison will pray for S even though she already knows that S obtained). And a similar conclusion will be reached on both eternalism and Molinism.<sup>51</sup> So it looks like a past-directed prayer can be efficacious even if the one praying knows that the prayed-for state of affairs has already obtained. This is a stronger, and more counterintuitive, conclusion that has been reached by other defenders of PIPs.

At this point, one might object that if the praying subject knows the desired result has already obtained, then she no longer has any motivation for offering the prayer.<sup>52</sup> Suppose that Allison knows that her father was not hurt or killed in the tornado. She might think to herself, ‘Wait, even if I don’t pray, my father will be safe from the tornado – God’s not going to change the past because I don’t pray. My prayer is clearly not needed on this score. And given that, it would be more worthwhile for me to do something else with my time, such as pray for something else, or just thank God for bringing it about he is safe.’

I agree with the objector that Allison’s not praying that God protect her father will not cause it to be the case that her father is hurt (since he already was not, in fact, injured). It is further true that knowing that her father is safe might undercut Allison’s motivation to pray that God keep her father safe. But this does not mean that such a prayer, if offered, cannot be impetratory. There is no reason to think that God cannot answer a petitionary prayer that is offered by an individual who does not have sufficient motivation for making that prayer. If Allison has reason to believe that God is the sort of deity who responds to petitionary prayers and that it is good for her to make such prayers, then she may have reason for offering a prayer for a state of affairs that she knows has already obtained. And, as we have seen above, there is reason to think that, on certain views in philosophical theology, such prayers can actually be efficacious.<sup>53</sup>

## Notes

1. It is not my intention in this paper to defend the claim that petitionary prayers *are* efficacious. Since my concern is with whether prayers about the past can be efficacious in the same way that prayers for the future are, I simply assume here that some petitionary prayers *are* efficacious. I am also not addressing *why* God might require prayer in order to intervene when it seems that He could intervene apart from the petition.
2. David Basinger *The Case for Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 105f.
3. In a previous paper, I criticized accounts of prayer according to which petitionary prayer is efficacious in only the first two senses. See Kevin Timpe 'Toward a process philosophy of petitionary prayer', *Theology & Philosophy*, 12 (2000), 397–418.
4. Basinger *The Case for Free Will Theism*, 106, 108.
5. *Idem* 'Why petition an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God?', *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), 25–42, 25. Petitionary prayers will differ from other merely necessary causal factors in that prayers, as a free action of agents possessing libertarian freedom, are beyond the direct control of God, whereas presumably the other necessary causal factors are not.
6. Peter Geach *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 87. Furthermore, as Geach notes, 'to say that God brought something about *because* of a man's prayers is not at all to say that, once the prayer had been said, God could not but grant them'; *ibid.*
7. Where they differ is *how* such prayers are causally efficacious.
8. Geach calls such prayers 'ex post facto' prayers (Geach *God and the Soul*, 90), and Michael Dummett calls them 'retrospective prayers' in 'Bringing about the past', *The Philosophical Review*, 73 (1964), 338–359.
9. This later clause means that overdetermined and necessary state of affairs cannot be the results of PIPs. Furthermore, God's desire to bring about certain states of affairs only as the result of petitions will be closely connected with His reasons for responding to petitionary prayers in the first place.
10. Eleonore Stump *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 154.
11. If Stump does have knowledge, rather than mere belief, in mind here, then there may be an inconsistency between this illustration and what I say later about openism, for openism denies that anyone can have knowledge of what agents will freely do in the future. But I think that there is good reason to think that the mother does not have knowledge in such a case. Insofar as the mother is not an omniscient agent, it is extremely plausible that her belief will be the same regardless of whether the child actually does make the request. If he does not, then her belief will not track the truth. But if she has the same belief whether or not he makes the request, then even in the case where he does make the request, her belief will not track the truth in the way required for knowledge.
12. Geoffrey Goddu has recently argued that it is logically possible that we can change the past. See his 'Time travel and changing the past: (or how to kill yourself and live to tell the tale)', *Ratio*, 16 (2003), 16–32.
13. For a discussion of this point and its relation to causation, see Gerald Gilmore Taylor 'Dummett on retrospective prayer', *Franciscan Studies*, 50 (1990), 309–323.
14. *Ibid.*, 319. I should state that I, unlike Taylor here, am not willing to say that backward causation is 'necessarily self-contradictory'. I do not here defend the claim that backward causation is possible; rather what I want to defend in this paper is the weaker claim that PIPs can be explained without the need for backward causation. Of course, if backward causation *is* possible, then it would provide another way of understanding PIPs.
15. C. S. Lewis *Miracles* (New York NY: Collier Books, 1947), 179f. I return to the conception of eternity that Lewis's defence of PIPs presupposes in a later section.
16. Geach *God and the Soul*, 90. Part of Geach's objection is to Lewis's endorsement of the doctrine of divine eternity. For a defence of the doctrine of divine timelessness that shows where Geach's objection is mistaken, see Eleonore Stump *Aquinas*, particularly ch. 4.
17. Geach *God and the Soul*, 88.
18. *Ibid.*, 89.
19. *Ibid.*, 89.
20. *Ibid.*, 93f.

21. Geoffrey Brown has independently come to a similar criticism of Geach: 'If he is not denying *contingency*, in the ordinary sense, to past states of affairs, but only means that there is nothing which can now be done which can form part of their causal nexus, then the argument boils down to no more than a flat denial of what Lewis is affirming [i.e. the possibility of PIPs]. What looked like a premise supporting the negation of Lewis's thesis now appears as a mere unsupported contradiction of that thesis. Geach is (trivially) correct in holding that a prayer can only be a cause of a state of affairs if it is uttered in circumstances which permit it to enter into a causal nexus of that event: but what those circumstances are is precisely the point of disagreement ... . One is tempted to think [as Geach apparently does that] "If God has already made up his mind and acted, then it makes no difference whether I pray now or not"'. But this ignores the very point at issue: that on Lewis's view, God's mind *has* been made up *taking into account* what I am about to do – I may not know this yet myself, but God does, *and always did*'; Geoffrey Brown 'Praying about the past', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1985), 83–86, 84. Despite my general agreement with Brown's evaluation of Geach's argument, my treatment of PIPs differs from his in two ways. First, whereas Brown discusses PIPs from only one theological perspective, in the present paper I relate such prayers to a number of philosophical positions. Second, at the end of the present paper I show how my account of PIPs has a stronger conclusion than that reached by Brown.
22. Geach *God and the Soul*, 94.
23. The simple-foreknowledge view should be distinguished from the stronger claim that it is in virtue of God's knowledge that free agents like Allison do what they do, that is, that God's knowledge causes Allison's actions. It is hard to see on this stronger view, often called 'theological determinism', or 'Augustinianism,' how an agent could be free in a libertarian sense.
24. In this paper, I intend to remain agnostic about *how* God knows what He knows, though I will speak at times in terms of God knowing propositions to be true. For an argument that God has *de re* but not *de dicto* knowledge, see William Alston 'Does God have beliefs?', in *idem Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 178–193. For an argument that God has *de dicto* as well as *de re* knowledge, see William Hasker 'Yes, God has beliefs!', *Religious Studies*, 24 (1988), 385–394.
25. Brown 'Praying about the past', 85.
26. See George Mavrodes 'Prayer', in E. Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/K070SECT2>: 'The divine foreknowledge may anticipate human action in the order of time, but it cannot substitute for that action, in the sense of making it irrelevant whether the action is actually done. For if the action were not done, then the divine knowledge would have been different from what it actually was. This applies to prayer as much as to anything else.'
27. The debate regarding the hard fact/soft fact distinction is also relevant here, as the simple foreknowledge view depends upon free agents having the type of counterfactual power over God's beliefs that is typical of soft facts. If one sides with the opponents of the hard fact/soft fact distinction and thinks that counterfactual power over God's beliefs involves backward causation, then one is likely to believe that the simple foreknowledge view requires backward causation to affirm the efficacy of PIPs. I believe that one can maintain the hard fact/soft fact distinction, though I do not argue for that conclusion here. For a recent argument against counterfactual power over God's beliefs, see Alan G. Padgett 'Divine foreknowledge and the arrow of time: on the impossibility of retrocausation', in G. Ganssle and D. Woodruff (eds) *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65–74.
28. An anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* suggested this worry.
29. Lewis *Miracles*, 177.
30. Boethius 'The consolation of philosophy', in H. Stewart, E. Rand, and S. Tester (eds) *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 422.5–424.21.
31. Thomas Aquinas *Disputed Questions on Truth*, J. McGlynn (tr.) (Chicago IL: H. Regnery Co., 1952), q. 12.6.
32. Stump *Aquinas*, 143.
33. *Idem* 'Petitionary prayer', in E. Stump and M. Murray (eds) *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 358.

34. Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 301.
35. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province (tr.), Ia, IIae, q. 83.
36. Stump *Aquinas*, 115ff.
37. Note that God is bringing it about that S occurs at  $t_1$ , not that God is bringing it about at  $t_1$  that S occurs. Since, according to (ii) God is atemporal, it does not make sense to say that one of God's actions occurs at a time; rather, it is accurate to say that the one of the effects of God's eternal and timeless act of willing occurs at a time.
38. Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 245.
39. God could either ensure that Allison finds herself in R by weakly actualizing R via His knowledge of other CCFs, or by strongly actualizing R.
40. Gregory A. Boyd's *Satan and Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) is a very interesting and thorough, though philosophically inconsistent, defence of one openist's view.
41. Two other central tenets of openism are the belief that humans (and perhaps other agents) have libertarian free will, and the belief that God is also a temporal being (*contra* eternalism). However, insofar as these other tenets are also thought true by one of more of the other positions canvassed here, I take the tenet about the extension of truth to be the primary demarcation of openism.
42. There will also be presently contingent future propositions that do not involve the action of free agents. Propositions dealing with whether particular atoms of a radioactive isotope will degrade at a particular time in the future are also examples of presently contingent future propositions. According to openism, God does not know the truth-value of any presently contingent future proposition (since they do not *now* have a truth-value to be known), and not just those regarding free human actions.
43. Terence Penelhum *Religion and Rationality* (New York NY: Random House, 1971), as quoted in Robert Young 'Petitioning God', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 11 (1974), 200.
44. It is for this reason that Penelhum and openism differ from the example given from Stump in the first section of this paper.
45. Taylor 'Dummett on retrospective prayer', 320.
46. Stump 'Petitionary prayer', 365, n. 1.
47. Flint *Divine Providence*, 230.
48. Lewis *Miracles*, 180.
49. Stump *Aquinas*, 505, n. 78.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Actually, the Molinist account of PIPs given above will need to be reworked, since the presentation given there assumes ignorance (i.e. it assumes that Allison's knowledge belongs to T rather than R). I think that a Molinist account of PIPs can be worked out even if the agent's knowledge regarding S belongs to R rather than T, though I will leave it to the reader to reconstruct the counterfactuals involved.
52. Various versions of this objection have been raised by Mike Murray, Mike Rota, Matt Zwolinski, and an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies*.
53. I would like to thank Mike Murray, Mike Rota, Lincoln Stevens, and two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* who provided valuable comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this paper. A preliminary draft was read to the Philosophy Department at the University of San Diego, where I benefited from many insightful questions. The writing of this paper was made possible by a fellowship from the Center for the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame.