A MORAL PROBLEM ABOUT PRAYER

Saul Smilansky

At a time of acute danger, people commonly petition God for help for themselves or their loved ones. Such prayer seems natural and, indeed, for believers, reasonable and acceptable. But once we closely examine what is actually happening in such situations, we see that frequently such prayer is not morally innocuous. I present a number of examples which illustrate the difficulty, and argue that even assuming the benevolence of the deity does not suffice to make such prayer legitimate.

Is prayer morally innocuous? I wish to present a problem about the morality of some common forms of prayer. Consider these three scenarios:

> AVALANCHE: A man is skiing in the mountains. As a result of a freakish weather event, a snowy mountain peak high above him breaks. To his horror, he sees the avalanche rushing in his direction. He is pinned on a ledge and cannot escape. There is only one, slight, hope: that the snow will turn at the nearby junction, bypass him, and head towards the little village below. The man prays to be saved.
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> HOSPITAL: A mother has just heard from her son's doctor that her son, who lies in the next room, unconscious and with acute liver failure, will certainly die within hours unless a donor near the son's age is found. Because the end

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is approaching so rapidly, the son's only chance seems to be that a traffic accident involving such a donor occurs nearby very soon. The woman begins to pray that a donor be found.

BOARDING SCHOOL: A teen age girl studies in a religious boarding school that her parents have compelled her to attend. The unhappy girl particularly hates the head teacher, who is very strict with the girls, exerts her authority by insulting them, and seems to the girl to be especially unpleasant toward her. Before going to bed each night, she prays earnestly for the head teacher's death.

In the first case the man is saved, for the avalanche does turn, unfortunately burying the village below; there are dozens of casualties among villagers and tourists, including some young children. The mother's wishes are also fulfilled: it rains unexpectedly, and a young motorcyclist loses control and slides into a tree. He is rushed in an ambulance to the hospital, and is pronounced dead on arrival. A gift-of-life card is found in his wallet, and his liver saves the son's life. The girl prays to no avail for the remaining years of her time at the school; the head teacher retires at a very late age, thus making further generations of students miserable.

There are numerous differences between the three cases. But in all of them, *prayer is aimed at furthering a certain goal, whose achievement is believed to entail or depend, beyond any reasonable doubt, on an undeserved death*. Is it not immoral to pray in this way?

Such prayers are very common and, at least in circumstances such as AVALANCE or HOSPITAL, seem natural and, indeed, reasonable and acceptable. It seems perverse to condemn such typical prayer, which, at a time of acute danger, petitions for help for oneself or one's child, as wrong. But once we closely examine what is actually happening in such situations, we shall see that such prayer is

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often morally problematic. I will argue that such prayer ought to be seen as a form of action (rather than, say, mere hope), thereby needing to meet the higher moral standards that apply to actions; and that the assumption of the benevolence of the deity does not suffice to make such prayer legitimate.

It would be immoral for the man to detonate a charge that would knowingly divert the avalanche away from him and towards the village. It would be morally unacceptable for the mother to drive around dumping oil on the roads adjacent to the hospital, so that motorcyclists would slip on the oil, die, and their organs could then be harvested. And it would be morally impermissible for the girl to poison her head teacher.

It might be morally acceptable for any of the three persons to hope or wish for their respective hopes and wishes, so long as they do nothing to help bring about those ends. The question of the moral status of mere hopes and wishes is interesting in itself, but it lies beyond our scope here. And after the fact, so long as they themselves have taken no action, it is, arguably, morally permissible for the three people not to be sorry, overall, that things developed in morally problematic ways. But even if future-oriented hoping and wishing, and not being sorry about events that have already occurred, are morally permissible in such circumstances, it would be manifestly immoral for these three people to *do* anything to further their aims. How, then, can prayer be morally legitimate, when its purpose is to invoke supernatural forces in this very direction?

There is little moral difficulty if the person does not really believe that his or her prayer has any efficacy of the relevant sort. If a woman repeatedly thrusts her pen into a picture of her boss without any belief that wrong will thereby occur to that person, then this might well indicate that the time has come for her to look for a new place of work, but it is not obvious that she is doing anything immoral. If, however, she is pushing pins into a voodoo doll

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with the full belief that the victim represented by the doll will die as a result, then her deeds are clearly morally disturbing, even though we know that her actions are in fact harmless. What matters to us when we wish to evaluate this woman morally is not so much whether we believe that the practice she is engaged in makes sense, but what the woman believes herself to be doing. Admittedly, given that we do not ourselves believe that her actions will harm their target, we might prefer that she continue doing so rather than engage him in effective violence, if those were the only choices. But her actions are not morally trivial, in what they indicate about her state of mind.

The question of the objective rationality of the belief in the efficacy of prayer is not our central concern here. What we care about, when morally evaluating people who pray, is primarily subjective rationality: whether the praying agents themselves think that there is a real chance that their prayers will achieve their goals, so that, through prayer, they will have made a difference, and God will deliver what they are asking for. We are assuming that the three praying people hope, and with a measure of belief, *that their prayers will move things in the desirable direction*: help to save them from the avalanche (while recognizing that many people in the valley below will suffer as a result); save their son (at the expected and necessary price of the life lost in a road accident); or rid them of the hated school principal. They believe in the general efficacy of prayer, and consequently they believe that *in their particular case* prayer might be equally efficacious.

The more devoutly they believe in the efficacy of their prayers, the greater the *prima facie* moral difficulty. But even if they are not certain that God will accommodate their prayers, they are clearly not praying with the firm belief that what they are doing will not have any relevant effect. They are praying, after all, essentially *in order* to have such an effect. And that in itself arguably suffices to indicate a lack of due regard for the potential (intended or foreseen) victims. In AVALANCHE, for example, the man is

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asking for something that clearly increases the likelihood that people will die in the village – while if the snow were to merely continue falling towards him, uninterrupted, there would hardly be any such risk. The very attempt to create such grave risk for numerous people is in itself morally questionable.

Some, perhaps more primitive, believers, may really believe that, in response to their prayer, the avalanche is simply going to puff up into thin air (in a situation like AVALANCHE), or that the person they care about will be miraculously healed without any need for a transplant (in a situation like HOSPITAL). But although the people we are considering would of course welcome such a radical miracle, and while they presumably believe that it is possible for God to do anything, they are in fact asking for less. In these two cases, they are asking for, and believe that they might well get, divine assistance in receiving something fairly realistic, in terms of the way the world we are familiar with typically works; namely, that the snow will turn, or that a suitable organ would very soon be donated (due to a road accident). Yet as far as *the believers* can see, if their prayers are fulfilled, other innocent people are thereby going to pay – and here resides the main difficulty. Asking God that one or one's loved ones be chosen at the expense of others can be morally unacceptable.

Established religions typically ask believers not to constantly base their hopes upon miracles, but to do what they can naturally (e.g. go to the doctor when ill). There is also a widespread presumption that divine intervention typically occurs within the familiar laws of nature and not, on a daily basis, through nature-defying radical miracles. It would thus seem unreasonable to assume that in situations such as I am describing, believers would necessarily think that God will operate in a way whereby they or their loved ones will be saved, but miraculously no one will be harmed in the process.

It might seem that, at least in cases of praying to God, there is what can be called a 'moral escape clause': the praying person also believes that God is a loving God, so

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that he will answer the prayers only if they pass the test of morality. But although there is an element of 'shared responsibility' in prayer, for it involves God as a primary agent, matters are not so simple. Many people think that their prayers may be efficacious, but they are not certain about the moral nature of the supernatural being (or about the level of intervention in the world he chooses to exercise, and the like). Since the evidence for the claim that, if there is a God, he is supremely good and omnipotent seems to be less than conclusive, such a sense of uncertainty should, arguably, be general. Hence, to pray for divine intervention in a direction that, in itself, one perceives as morally problematic (i.e. as likely to involve the sacrifice of innocent people), just because God will be there to block one's prayer from obtaining if it is morally inappropriate – seems unacceptable.

But even if we set aside the uncertainty as to the moral nature of the deity or about his plans, the believer will often be morally at fault. To begin with, it is often *misleading* to describe the state of mind of these people in a thoroughly moralized way. There are individual differences, and surely some believers do pray within the terms of the 'moral escape clause', and would never want to benefit at the expense of innocent others. But this cannot be universal, and in particular is unlikely to always prevail in the trying situations of the sort that we are examining. In AVALANCHE, the man (as I am understanding him) does not believe that the villagers or tourists, whom he realizes will pay the price if, through the grace of God, he is saved, *deserve* to die, no more than he believes that they were about to die soon in any case; he simply does not care, at that moment – he wishes to live, and calls upon God to work the miracle *for him*. It would similarly be tendentious to claim that the woman in HOSPITAL or the girl in BOARDING SCHOOL are necessarily constrained by overwhelming moral considerations when aiming to elicit divine intervention on their side, in order to save the son or kill the head teacher, respectively.

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Often, in grim circumstances such as the man in AVALANCHE or the woman in HOSPITAL confront, it seems as though one would almost need to be a saint to pray in a way that would insist on the relevant moral limitations, for to do so would virtually ensure defeat for oneself or for one's child. And in the way these cases have been described, a way that I do not think is eccentric, they are not saints: the man, for example, believes that realistically the only way in which he can be saved would be for the avalanche to turn, and he knows that, once this happens, many innocent people will die. But as I understand him he is manifestly *not* praying for the avalanche to turn rather than hit him 'only if no one will be hurt as a result'. Given his beliefs and priorities, as we have just delineated them, praying in such a morally conditional way would not make much sense. Yet morally, I claim, it is impermissible for the man to ask that the avalanche turn away from him, when he understands that this is almost certain to cause carnage among scores of innocent people (and as we saw, even if he is not certain, imposing such extreme risk would itself be dubious). Similarly, morally a woman cannot pray that an innocent human being die, just for the sake of her son. Such prayer exhibits morally unacceptable intentions and attitudes, trespassing elementary deontological and virtue ethical constraints and concerns.

Consider that even firm believers would judge that it is morally unacceptable for the man to detonate and tilt the snow, for the woman to sprinkle oil on the roads, or for the girl to put poison in her head teacher's soup – and then to leave it to God to undo this; if he so wishes. It would be considered immoral for them to do those things even if they believe that God is an omnipotent, benevolent being. Yet surely it is no more effort for God to *block* human deeds than to perform those deeds for them. This further challenges the view that 'I may pray for *prima facie* morally unacceptable things, and leave all the moral responsibility to God'.

Similarly, common consciousness would want to clearly distinguish between the girl in BOARDING SCHOOL, on

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the one hand, and the man and woman in AVALANCHE and HOSPITAL, on the other. The girl's prayer is manifestly immoral and impermissible, it will be said, while their prayers are not. But this distinction becomes much harder to make if one supports a 'separation of powers' position, whereby people may pray for whatever they wish, leaving it to God to determine what will unfold.

God will presumably do, or allow, what he wills, but that is not for people to decide; they ought to mind not the action or inaction of God, but their own deeds. One must take due care in one's actions, and not act harmfully or negligently (to the best of one's ability). In the same way, one must take care to understand the relevant possibilities, and not pray for that which, on one's best understanding, it would be bad if it occurred. There are certain things that it is morally impermissible to pray for. When (as is frequently the case) prayer is intended to make a difference, and – if one takes due care and pays attention – one can come to understand the moral dubiousness that is involved in the difference one aims at, then one ought not to act with moral indifference to what one is asking for. Recall that, as far as *the believers* in our stories can see, innocent people are going to pay the price of the fulfillment of their prayers. It seems to be bad faith to deny that there is a moral difficulty here, with agents who have such dubious intentions, and perform such problematic actions.

The prayers of the girl in BOARDING HOUSE, asking for the death of her head teacher, would be widely condemned. If all cases were like that, then little purpose would be served by my paper. But I have tried to show that something much more interesting is going on, and that in fact other cases (such as AVALANCHE and HOSPITAL) which many would be inclined to see as natural and acceptable, are in fact much more dubious, and on a closer look resemble BOARDING SCHOOL more than we realize. Again, it may seem perverse to condemn such typical prayer, by normative believers, which, at a time of acute danger, petitions for help for oneself or one's child, but I

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have argued that such prayers are frequently not innocent, and are morally unacceptable.

If the person praying (or engaged in a similar practice) in situations such as we have considered, believes that his or her doing so may well be relevantly efficacious, my claim is that such an activity will then often be morally problematic. The epistemically requisite uncertainty, as to the foolproof ability and moral commitment of a deity, should impose severe constraints on what one prays for. And even if the believer could have complete belief in divine omnipotence and benevolence, prayer can be morally questionable, when it expresses and attempts to achieve morally unacceptable intentions. People ought not as a rule to ask, in prayer, for that which they should not morally permit themselves to try to achieve by themselves. In many common and allegedly harmless circumstances of the sort that we have explored, prayer, for a believer, may well be immoral.[1]

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Note

[1] A longer version of this paper appeared, under the title 'A Problem about the Morality of Some Common Forms of Prayer', in *Ratio* vol. 25 (2012), 207–215. I am grateful to Stephen Law for the invitation to publish this shortened version, and to the editor of *Ratio* and John Wiley and Sons for the permission to do so. Versions of the original paper were presented at the Israeli Philosophical Association annual meeting in 2010, and at the Joseph Butler society in Oxford University in 2011; I am grateful to participants on both occasions for their comments. I am very grateful to Gabriel Citron, Zohar Geva, Amihud Gilead, Michael Harris, Arnon Keren, Hugh LaFollette, Iddo Landau, Tal Manor, Ariel Meirav, Adrian Moore, Juha Raikka, Talia Shaham, Daniel Statman, Nehama Verbin, and the editor and an anonymous referee for this journal, for comments on drafts of the paper. I am particularly grateful to Hugh LaFollette for sharing with me a draft of a paper of his on wishing.

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