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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why is praying for the past wrong?

Elad Moria

Department of Philosophy, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
Email: elad4789@gmail.com

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Abstract

I begin with the intuition that there is something wrong with praying for the past, for example, praying for a basketball team to win after the game has ended. My aim is to find a philosophical explanation for why this is wrong. I explore three explanations for the wrongness in praying for the past, reject the first two, and offer a third. The first is based on the idea that prayer for the past is inefficacious. This assumption turns out to be mistaken. The second relies on religious considerations; I reject this explanation since it is too narrow and does not explain the initial intuition. I then argue that prayer for past events is wrong in virtue of being an unwarranted response, similar to how emotions can be unwarranted. I use concepts from the philosophy of fittingness to articulate my explanation.

Keywords: prayer; prayer for the past; rationality; fittingness

Introduction

Praying for the past is a phenomenon discussed in the literature of philosophy of religion. Several philosophers start with the assumption – whether explicit or implicit – that there is something wrong with praying for the past. Some of these philosophers argue for the possibility and legitimacy of praying for the past despite this initial intuition, while others refute these arguments.[1] I will address this discussion and the reasons each camp offers throughout this article. It should be noted that this philosophical discussion has an impact outside academic circles. In an online search, I discovered that even non-academic religious authors not only defend the possibility of praying for the past but also report engaging in such prayers themselves.[2] Therefore, debating about prayer for the past is debating about a live option that is part – or might be part – of religious people's lives.

In my article, I start with the intuition that most authors begin with: it seems that something is wrong in praying for the past. I myself have this intuition and my aim in this article is to explain it and provide a reason why prayer for the past is wrong. In the course of the discussion, I address reasons that have been raised for and against praying for the past. My explanation for the wrongness in praying for the past is a novel reason against praying for the past. Since my project is to explain the intuitive wrongness in praying for the past, I will clarify in this section in what sense I think prayer for the past is intuitively wrong. I will do it by offering a case of praying for the past that highlights this intuition. Then I will address two worries that might arise from the project I undertook: the first is that prayer for that past is trivially wrong and thus doesn't need explanation and the second is the claim that prayer for the past does not seem intuitively wrong.

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I begin with a simple case of praying for the past which illustrates its wrongness. I will call this case the UNSEEN MATCH case:

> Tonight is the final match of David's favourite basketball team. Unfortunately, David's schedule does not allow him to watch the match; he has to work. His work takes longer than expected, and when he finishes, he asks a friend whether the game is over. The friend confirms that it is, and David responds by addressing God: 'Please let it be that my team won the match!'.

David's response to the fact that the match ended seems wrong. The match is already over and there is nothing to pray about anymore. As I said, the aim of this article is to explain in what sense prayer in such cases is wrong. When I say David's prayer seems wrong, I mean wrong in the sense of being criticizable. It feels like David should have known better and avoided praying. This is how I will use the term 'wrong' throughout this article, except where I explicitly indicate a different meaning. I intentionally leave the exact meaning of wrong open and ambiguous. Some philosophers regard prayer for the past as potentially irrational (Flint 1997, 231), while others address critiques of it on moral grounds (Dummett 1964, 341; Lebens and Goldschmidt 2017, 12). I will explore this distinction further when addressing the second explanation.

To say that praying for the past seems wrong is not to suggest it is strange or surprising that people engage in such prayers. As Dummett (1964, 341) notes, such prayers – when the petitioner does not know the outcome – can be the most natural thing in the world. However, Dummett himself also argues that even the most natural thing might make no sense. To elaborate, such prayers seem psychologically natural. That is, we understand why petitioners engage in such prayers. We can see the inner mechanism that leads them to this behaviour: they are confronted with doubt and uncertainty, wish for a particular outcome, and the fact that they still do not know what happened makes them address the situation as if it is still open and pray about it. Nonetheless, those prayers also seem wrong. The psychological mechanism sheds light on why people came to engage in such prayers but not on why it is the right thing to do. Even though we understand prayer for the past, we also feel that something is wrong in it. We understand why they want to be able to pray about such instances but know that for some reason it is wrong to pray such prayers. At most, they can wish for it.

As I said, my intuition is that prayer for the past is wrong. You might agree with me that prayer for the past is wrong to the extent of wondering whether it is worth discussing. Prayer for the past is so absurd, you might think, that we should interpret David's prayer not as a genuine request from God to change the outcome of the match but as a mere expression of wish. Furthermore, David is only responding instinctively to the fact that the match ended. If he had only thought about it, he would not have uttered his wish as a prayer. No one would pray for the past in a calculated and deliberate way. In addition, prayer for the past does not only seem wrong but also has absurd implications. To illustrate, no one will pray that World War II had not existed because the implication of such an outcome will change so much of what we know about the world that it is hard to understand what is being asked in such a prayer. If this is so, the wrongness of prayer for the past is not something worth articulating in a philosophical paper, it is obvious.[3]

But as I said at the beginning of this article, the discussion about praying for the past and the reasons for praying such prayers did make some religious people do that. Some people do, not only in the grip of their emotions, pray for the past. Of course, it is important what is being asked in the prayer. In the course of this article, I will discuss different kinds of requests like changing the past and influencing it in advance. Additionally, not all

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prayers for changing the past lead to the implications I presented in the last paragraph; some requests could be relatively minor and do not require as large a change in reality as that involved in praying that World War II had never happened.[4] UNSEEN MATCH is intended to represent the general case of praying for the past – one in which David offers a genuine prayer to God. My aim is to explain what I believe is wrong with such a prayer, even under its strongest possible defence.

On the other hand, you might not find the idea that praying for the past is wrong as intuitive as I do. You might think there is nothing criticizable in praying for the past. If this is the case, I invite you to read this article not as one that tries to find an explanation for this wrongness, but as one that provides possible challenges for thinking there is no problem with praying for the past. When I present my preferred explanation, I welcome you to explain why this explanation is wrong.

I will consider three explanations for the wrongness in praying for the past. The first, which seems the most obvious, is based on the idea that prayer for the past is inefficacious; however, this assumption turns out to be mistaken. The second explanation regards praying for the past as religiously wrong; this explanation is based on religious considerations about how one ought to address God. I reject this explanation by arguing that it does not properly capture the intuition I began with. The third explanation, which I endorse, requires us to think of prayer as a response that is subject to norms of fittingness.

First explanation: the inconsistency in praying for the past

The most dominant issue in the literature about praying for the past is the question of its efficacy.[5] The first explanation I examine is that praying for the past is wrong because prayer for the past is inefficacious. Since the outcome of the match is already settled, praying about it is inefficacious; the prayer cannot influence the events it is supposed to. Or so one might think. I will challenge the idea that prayer for the past is inefficacious later. For now, it is important to notice that arguing that prayer for the past is not efficacious is not sufficient for explaining why it is wrong to pray for the past. It is knowing that prayer for the past is not efficacious that render praying for the past wrong. The next case will demonstrate this point, I call it the UNKNOWN PREGNANCY case:

> Hanna has difficulty becoming pregnant. After one of her attempts, she takes a pregnancy test that tells her she isn't pregnant. Before another attempt, she prays for it to succeed. What Hanna doesn't know is that her first attempt was actually successful, and the pregnancy test was wrong – Hanna is already pregnant.

Hanna is wrong in thinking that she is not pregnant. She is pregnant and, consequently, her prayer is no longer efficacious, just like David's prayer.[6] However, Hanna's prayer is not directed to the past. She prays for the attempt to succeed when she thinks there is still a chance for fertilization to happen or not to happen. This is why, despite Hanna is being wrong (her belief that she is not pregnant is false), her prayer does not seem criticizable. This is how her case is different from David's.

If praying for the past is wrong in virtue of being inefficacious, Hanna's prayer should also be criticizable. Since it isn't, by modus tollens, the inefficaciousness is not what makes praying for the past wrong. UNKNOWN PREGNANCY makes it clear that it is not the inefficaciousness of praying for the past alone that makes it wrong, but the petitioner knowing that the prayer is inefficacious which makes it so. Hanna's prayer is inefficacious, but she, unlike David, doesn't know that. It is the knowledge that his prayer is inefficacious and praying despite this knowledge that makes the petitioner inconsistent in his beliefs and therefore open to criticism.

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To see this, consider David again. In his prayer, David tries to affect the events. On the one hand, David believes that his prayer can change the events. On the other hand, David knows that the events are already determined, that his team either won or lost. Additionally, David probably thinks that even God cannot change the past.[7] So, David knows that his prayer cannot change the events. In his prayer, it seems he believes that it is possible to change things, but he knows that it is impossible. To conclude, there is inconsistency in David's beliefs. This inconsistency is the first explanation for the wrongness in praying for the past.

I now consider three objections to this explanation. These objections argue that there is no inconsistency in praying for the past. I will reject the first two and accept the third objection.

First, one might say that when David prays, he forgets or doesn't pay attention to the fact that the events are already determined. Thus, there is no inconsistency in praying for it. This may be the case in some instances of praying for the past, but it is unlikely to be the case in all of them. In those cases, according to the first explanation, praying for the past isn't wrong in the sense of the petitioner being inconsistent. Instead, it is wrong in the sense of the petitioner not noticing the fact that what she prays for is already determined. But all those other cases where it is unlikely to attribute forgetfulness or inattentiveness to the petitioner still call for an explanation for their wrongness, which may be explained by the idea of inconsistency.

Second, one might object and argue that praying for something does not necessarily entail believing that the prayer can bring about a change. To respond to this objection, it is important to emphasize that my interest here is in petitionary prayers. That is, prayers that contain a request for God to do something, rather than praise or thank Him. In petitionary prayers, one asks God to bring about something, so it is reasonable to attribute to the petitioner the belief that her prayer can bring about what she is asking for.

Still, there could be other reasons for praying petitionary prayers that aren't based on the belief that the prayer is efficacious. People might pray petitionary prayers to calm themselves down, to express sympathy with others, or for many other reasons. Petitionary prayers made for these reasons do not necessarily entail the belief that prayer can bring about what is being prayed for. Explained this way, these prayers do not seem wrong, granted that they can achieve what the prayer is for. However, at least some petitioners – if not most of them – pray in order to bring about the events they are praying for. It is hard to see their actions as reasonable unless they believe their prayers could bring that about. Those who pray for the past in that way are inconsistent as long as they know that what they are praying about already happened.

It should also be mentioned that one might pray for the past in a different way. One might pray while knowing his prayer probably isn't efficacious. Knowing this, he doesn't expect his prayer to work as a regular prayer for the future but to work just in case prayers for the past might work. Consider David again. Maybe after he prays, his friend asks him how he can pray for something in the past. David might answer something like, 'you are probably right, but it wouldn't hurt to pray, so I pray just in case it might work'. We might criticize this kind of prayer; I have doubts about the emotional devoutness one will feel when praying such a prayer, but we cannot say it is inconsistent. David doesn't believe his prayer is efficacious; he just thinks that praying nonetheless won't hurt.[8] However, not all petitioners pray for the past in that way. Some pray for the past in the same way they are praying for the future. Are they being inconsistent? According to the objection I will now discuss, even such petitioners might be understood as perfectly consistent.

I will endorse the following objection to the first explanation. It can be argued that praying for the past might be efficacious (Lewis 1947, 214; Dummett 1964, 342–343). Lewis and

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Dummett argue that prayer for the past to an omniscient God might be efficacious. Since God knows the future, He knows in advance that David will pray for his team to have won. Knowing this, God might take it into account when deciding which team will win (assuming God is involved in such matters). In this way, prayer is efficacious not because God changes the past after the prayer, but because it influences, through God's omniscience, the way He predetermined events before they happen.[9]

This argument is based on theological assumptions about God's knowledge. Flint (1997) and Timpe (2005) dedicate their papers to a thorough discussion of this matter. Flint concludes that according to a Molinist account of God's knowledge, praying for the past can be efficacious, and Timpe argues that praying for the past can be efficacious according to three out of four central accounts of God's knowledge.[10]

My aim here is not to engage in a theological discussion, so I will accept Flint's and Timpe's theological conclusions. According to them, prayer for the past can be efficacious. Therefore, we cannot explain the wrongness in praying for the past in virtue of inconsistency in the petitioner's beliefs. David can pray for his team to have won while knowing that the outcome is already settled and that one cannot change the past. This is because he doesn't try to change the outcome after it has been settled, but seeks to influence the match before it ends through God's knowledge. Petitioners who pray for the past in this way are not inconsistent in their beliefs about the efficacy of their prayer. They may rightly believe that their prayer can be efficacious.

Moreover, those petitioners also avoid the absurd implication of praying to change the past. Praying for the past in this way relies on the assumption that God already took the prayer into account when deciding the matter and does not assume that the prayer changes what happened. Therefore, the petitioner's prayer doesn't include any absurd implication that comes out from changing the past. What she asks for either has already happened or has not.

It should be noticed that this change in our interpretation of David's prayer does not require much. David's prayer can be uttered in the same way I presented it, and everything can stay the same except David's intentions in his prayer. If David does not pray for God to change the outcome now, only prays on the assumption that God may have considered his prayer in advance, there is nothing wrong with it.

Nevertheless, David's prayer is still about the past and thus still seems wrong. Even after explaining how David's prayer can be efficacious, his praying in the UNSEEN MATCH case still seems wrong. The first explanation, which claimed that prayer for the past is wrong because the petitioner cannot believe in its efficacy, was shown to be mistaken – we saw that the petitioner might, in fact, believe her prayer is efficacious. My aim is to explain what is wrong with praying for the past, which requires examining further explanations for its wrongness. The point about the efficacy of prayer for the past imposes a certain constraint on other explanations for the wrongness of praying for the past. A suitable explanation will be one that explains the wrongness in praying for the past even in cases where what is being asked for is the prayer to influence, and not change, the events. From now on, when thinking about prayer for the past, we should think not only about prayer for changing the past – which is inconsistent – but also about prayer for affecting the settled past through God's knowledge. Even such prayer, which has no absurd implications, must be explained for its wrongness.

I conclude that the first explanation is mistaken in trying to explain the wrongness in praying for the past. Since my project is to explain the wrongness in praying for the past, I must continue to find an alternative explanation. But before doing so, it is worth pointing out an interesting upshot of the objection just mentioned. Lewis, Dummett, Flint, and Timpe accept the conclusion that prayer for the past is efficacious and thus that one may

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pray for the past. However, only Timpe is willing to face an odd upshot of this conclusion. If prayer for the past is efficacious through God's omniscience, then there is no difference between praying for the past when one doesn't know what happened and praying for something one knows had happened (I will discuss cases of praying for something you know had not happened in the next section). Even petitioners who pray for what they know had happened might rightly believe that their prayer can be efficacious. Timpe accepts this view and defends it (Timpe 2005, 319).

To me, this view sounds highly implausible. I began by acknowledging that there is something psychologically natural about praying for past events when the petitioner doesn't know what happened. The same naturalness doesn't hold in cases where the petitioner knows what happened. So even if I can understand the motivation to justify praying for the past in cases when the petitioner doesn't know what happened, I don't share the motivation to justify cases of praying for past events when the petitioner knows what happened.[11]

Second explanation: praying for the past is an impiety

As Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) argue even if prayer for the past might be efficacious there might be other reasons for thinking it is wrong to pray for the past. The wrongness of praying for the past might be explained by the impiety involved in doing so. According to this explanation, praying for the past is wrong because, in doing so, one violates some religious norm. There are norms that govern a religious person's relationship with God, and praying for the past violates one of them.

Of course, we should ask what kind of religious norm is being violated. Lebens and Goldschmidt (Lebens and Goldschmidt 2017, 13) briefly mention two possible options, which I will view as different versions of the second explanation. The first one is that praying for the past is like asking for miracles, something a religious person should not do. The second version is that in praying for the past one expresses dissatisfaction with God's providence since God didn't mind things happening the way they did. I will first offer objections to each version of the explanation and then raise a more general objection to the second explanation.

According to the first version, we shouldn't pray for miracles, and praying for the past includes a request for a miracle. I won't quarrel here with the norm itself – that we shouldn't pray for miracles. I grant this assumption but argue that praying for the past does not necessarily include a request for a miracle. The question of whether praying for the past includes requesting a miracle depends on the content of the prayer. Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) think God can change the past. If praying for the past means asking God to change it, then it is clearly asking for a miraculous thing. Lebens and Goldschmidt themselves argue that God would change the past only under very specific circumstances.

However, we have already seen a way to pray for the past without the content of the prayer being something miraculous. In the previous section, we saw that God might take into account a prayer made after the prayed-for event has happened. This kind of prayer does not necessarily include a request for a miracle; it depends on the specific request. For example, David's prayer does not necessarily include a miracle. God might influence the outcome in many ways that wouldn't include any miracle, just small, everyday changes that would determine the outcome. If David's prayer includes a request for a miracle, like asking God to stop the ball in mid-air, it is not the fact that this prayer is past-directed that renders it a prayer for a miracle. It would count as a prayer for a miracle even if it was directed to the future.

So only specific cases of praying for the past – those in which the petitioner is asking God to change the past – might be explained as praying for a miracle. Other cases, which still seem wrong to us, do not necessarily include praying for miracles. The first version of

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the second explanation is too narrow and does not meet the constraint I set at the end of the first section.

I turn to the second version of the second explanation. This is the idea that praying for the past is wrong since if things turned out a certain way, we might view it as evidence that God didn't mind them turning out this way. Thus, praying for something else expresses dissatisfaction with God's providence.

I can see this kind of dissatisfaction only in cases where the petitioner knows what happened and prays against it. What about cases where one prays for things to have happened exactly as they were (as discussed at the end of the previous section)? Or, more importantly, when one doesn't know what happened? Asking for one way for things to have happened is not necessarily expressing dissatisfaction with God's providence. One just expresses her desire. It might be that when she learns what happened, she will humbly accept the events.[12] Although this version of the second explanation is not confined to cases when one prays for changing the past and meets the constraint I set, it is still too narrow. It explains only cases when one knows what happened and prays against it.

I end this section by arguing that the second explanation, in either version, is not a good one because the wrongness that it locates in praying for the past is different from the intuition I began with. This point is equally true about a possibility I didn't explore here, that what is wrong with praying for the past is violating some more general moral – and not especially religious – norm.

According to the first explanation discussed, praying for the past is wrong in the sense of being irrational since it involves contradicting beliefs. According to the second one, however, it is wrong in the sense of being some kind of offence. Those are different senses of wrongness. Both meet the condition of being something criticizable, but they are still different in the sense in which they are wrong and criticizable. My intuition about praying for the past is much closer to the idea of something irrational being done than to that of an offence – either religious or moral – being committed. If it were something like the second sense, I would have expected that my intuition would also include that David did something bad. But it doesn't; it only seems as if David did something wrong. To illustrate, think about a case where God reveals His will that you shouldn't pray about something. Nonetheless, you pray about it. There is arguably something wrong here. It is wrong in a sense closer to moral wrongness. It seems forbidden, not merely wrong. But the same doesn't apply to praying for the past – at least not to me. There is something wrong, but not morally wrong.

The third explanation, which I now turn to present, captures this first sense of wrongness in praying for the past while meeting the constraint I set in the first section. It can explain why prayer for the past is wrong even in cases where one prays for influencing the past and not changing it.

Third explanation: praying for the past is unwarranted

In this section, I offer a third explanation for the wrongness of praying for the past. This explanation relies on the notion of fittingness and the philosophical discussion about it. According to this explanation, since prayer has an object, or it is about something, it should respond to its object correctly. Praying for the past is an unfitting response to the object – the past event – and for this reason, it is wrong.[13]

In the first subsection, I expand on the philosophy of fittingness and explain why I think we can and should use the tools it provides us with while thinking about prayer. Then, in the second subsection, I investigate what prayer is typically about and argue that the past is not something that merits prayer.

The discussion in this section is not about whether prayer is inherently future-oriented or not. One might think that since prayer is inherently future-oriented, prayer for the past

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is trivially wrong.[14] The reason I do not accept this argument is that merely mentioning that prayer is inherently future-oriented would beg the question: Why think prayer is inherently future-oriented? One reason may be that in prayer, we ask God to intervene and prevent something bad from happening or to resolve an issue by making something happen. Both preventing something from happening and making something happen are clearly requests for future events. But the idea that God may hear our prayers in advance can meet this condition. Even in praying for the past, all we ask is that God will make something happen in advance that will resolve an issue or prevent something bad from happening. This prayer is past-oriented but still its content isn't that different from a future-oriented prayer. So, we cannot conclude that prayer is inherently future-oriented.

Besides, other attitudes and responses that seem essentially future-oriented might not seem so under stricter examination. For example, hope and fear seem future-oriented, but discussions about those attitudes provide reasons to think differently (see Chignell 2013 for hope; Bordini and Torrengo 2023 for fear). Instead of arguing that prayer is essentially future-oriented, I ask what prayer's object is and only then ask whether the past is a fitting object for prayer.

The philosophy of fittingness

In this subsection, I argue that we can implement the concept of fittingness to prayer. My explanation of the wrongness in praying for the past is that prayer does not fit when it is about a past event. For articulating my explanation, a brief introduction is in order.

The philosophy of fittingness is one of those hot topics in current philosophy. The discussion about it took much place in the philosophy of emotions. Philosophers used it to discuss instances where a certain emotion seems out of place (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000b is a seminal paper). Since then, the notion of fittingness has been used more broadly. Different attitudes or responses like beliefs, emotions, and desires are said to be fitting or unfitting (Howard 2018).

Fittingness is a relation that holds between responses – such as beliefs, emotions, or desires – and the objects they respond to (Howard 2018). Those responses are directed at their objects and this property of intentionality is what makes them evaluable for fit. To say that a response is fitting is to say that its object merits the response. The same response can have different objects. For example, I might fear a bear or the loss of money. Different objects that merit fear, for example, all have in common properties that make fear fit them; they are dangerous or harmful. These properties are what we call the formal object. Different states have different formal objects. Certain properties are relevant when we think about fear (danger, perhaps) and others when we think about anger (offence, perhaps); those properties are the formal objects of different responses.

The notion of the formal object is helpful in evaluating the fittingness of a response. When evaluating a certain response to an object, the question is whether this object matches the formal object.[15] When it does, the response fits and when it doesn't, it is unfitting. When what I fear is dangerous, my fear is fitting; when I fear something harmless – like a mouse – my fear is unfitting (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 41).

Even when a response is unfitting, it might be justifiably unfitting. This may occur when I respond to something where it is rationally justified to attribute the relevant properties to the object, even though these properties are absent. In those cases, although the response is unfitting, it is warranted (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000a, 745). For example, fearing someone pointing a gun at me is warranted even if, unbeknownst to me, it is a fake gun. Warrant is attached to rationality, to the agent responding to apparent reasons, while fittingness is attached to objective reasons, that is to say, the fact that there are reasons that support some kind of response (Na'aman 2021, 532). An unfitting attitude is one that responds incorrectly

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to its object; it is mistaken. But when you are unwarrantedly responding to some object, that is when you respond to it although you know the relevant evaluative properties are absent, you are exposed to criticism about being irrational and not merely mistaken. This notion of warrant is the one I will focus on while trying to capture the way we might criticize one another for doing things, like praying for the past.

One aspect of the idea of fittingness and warrant is its neutrality to other reasons like moral or prudential ones (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000b). To illustrate, imagine trying to convince your friend that she shouldn't envy her co-worker for getting a project she wanted. One way to persuade her is by arguing that the project isn't worth pursuing – it's just more work without any benefits. By this, you would be saying that there is nothing to be envious about; envy isn't fitting in this case. Alternatively, you could tell her that envy is a vice or that it will make her miserable. This offers a different way to argue that she shouldn't envy, and these reasons are valid even if the project is actually a great opportunity for advancement and there is something to envy.

In this way, the notions of fittingness and warrant capture a distinct way to criticize one's responses. This is not criticism due to the response's moral or prudential values but due to its way of relating to its object. This point is important to me because, as I said at the end of the second section, I'm trying to capture the wrongness of praying for the past and our criticism of it in terms of rationality and not in moral or religious terms. This is how the third explanation meets the condition I set at the end of the second section.

So far, I have described the discussion about fittingness in relation to the philosophy of emotions and similar responses. But prayer, you might wonder, is different from emotions or beliefs, so how could I use the idea of fittingness? In this regard, it should be mentioned that recently there have been suggestions to use the notion of fittingness more broadly and to apply it to other phenomena like action. The issue of action is problematic because at least some actions seem to lack the intentionality that emotions and other mental states have. This lack of intentionality makes it hard to apply standards of fit to actions in the same way we do to emotions. Nonetheless, there are philosophers who challenge this conclusion and think we might apply standards of fit to actions (Howard 2018; Naar 2021; Na'aman 2022, ft. 11).

I mention the issue of action since prayer is arguably a kind of action.[16] You might think that this undermines my attempt to think about prayer in terms of fittingness. But discussing the fittingness of prayer is easier since prayer, unlike other actions, is clearly about something. Petitionary prayer especially is about something; intuitively, it is about what one prays for. Applying fittingness conditions here doesn't require much. Fittingness is a relation that holds between attitudes that treat their objects in a certain way and those objects. According to this view, fear of a mouse is unfitting because it treats the mouse as dangerous, even though it is not (Deonna and Teroni 2024). In the same way, praying about something unfitting is treating it as prayer-worthy when it is not.[17]

After establishing that prayer can be evaluated for fit, we need to identify its formal object – what properties it is typically about. The most plausible thing prayer is about, one might think, is what one prays for. According to this, David's prayer is about his team winning the match. I think this deserves more reflection, and I will discuss this point in the next subsection.

Why is praying for the past unwarranted?

In order to identify prayer's object, I start with two elements of prayer from Davison (2022, 38–39). One is what Davison calls prayer's target: what the petitioner is praying for, that is, the outcome she asks God to bring about.[18] The second is what Davison calls prayer's focus: the state of concern in the petitioner that she prays about.[19] So, if someone prays for the

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bus to come, the bus's coming is the target of the prayer, and the fact that the bus is far from her is the focus of the prayer.

I think both the target and the focus of prayer can be understood as what prayer is about in the sense required by fittingness. When we pray for something, we treat this thing as desirable, as having certain properties in virtue of which we pray and ask for it. Likewise, in praying, we treat the situation we are in – the focus of our prayer – as something that is in our concern. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to conclude that prayer stands in the normative relation of fittingness to both its target and its focus. Consequently, there might be outcomes it is unfitting to pray for and situations which it is unfitting to pray in.[20]

My way of showing that praying for the past is wrong is by discussing its focus. I will argue that when we pray for the past, we treat the situation we are in unfittingly. Hence, for my discussion, I need only the part of the focus of prayer. Praying for the past is an unfitting response to the focus of prayer, as I will now argue. A similar discussion about the fittingness of the target of prayer might be called for and perhaps could yield an explanation for the wrongness in praying for the past, but I won't take this path here.

What is the formal object of the focus of prayer? I already said that the focus of prayer is something in the petitioner's concern, something she cares about. Thus, first, the object must be something the petitioner cares about. Praying for something the petitioner is indifferent to is unfitting. Imagine a friend of yours who you know to be indifferent about climate change. She occasionally expresses the opinion that climate change is not something we need to care about and that we should not worry about it. Then, you hear her praying to God to solve the problems that climate change inflicts on us and our world. If her opinions are honest, her prayer seems unfitting. Prayer fits when we pray about something we care about.

Second, in praying, we try to influence, through God's will, the state of affairs in our concern. Hence, it would be safe to say that in praying about something we treat it as open for influence or as undetermined.[21] The focus of prayer is an undetermined concern. To illustrate this, think of the case of praying about the past when someone knows what happened. I said earlier that my intuition is that this is wrong, and now we can see why. Praying is fitting when what one is praying about is undetermined. Since one knows what happened, and since we usually treat things in the past as determined, it is unfitting and unwarranted to pray about them. That is, it is wrong to attribute the property of being undetermined to this concern.[22]

We can now return to UNSEEN MATCH. When he prays for his team to win, does David treat his concern fittingly? The answer depends on whether the situation David is in is determined or not. It is clear that the score of the match is already determined. David knows that even though he doesn't know what the score is, the match is determined for him in the same way it is for his friend who knows the score. David is praying about a determined situation as if it is undetermined and, hence, David's prayer is unfitting.

I'm not denying that there is something in the situation that causes David to pray. But this isn't a property of the situation itself. I think what causes David to pray for the score is the association this case has with other cases. The fact that other cases of undetermined situations are accompanied with uncertainty and that the UNSEEN MATCH is also a case of uncertainty causes David to act in the same way and pray. However, this explanation for his behaviour doesn't explain why David's prayer is fitting.

David's prayer is not only unfitting but also unwarranted. David knows that the score is already determined, and thus we expect him to understand that prayer is not called for here. And according to the way I identified unwarranted responses earlier, this is what makes his prayer not only mistaken but also irrational and therefore wrong. In contrast, it cannot be said that Hanna's prayer in UNKNOWN PREGNANCY is unwarranted. Her prayer

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is unfitting, just like David's, but she doesn't know that because she doesn't know that what she is praying about is already determined. This is why her prayer is warranted. My explanation makes it clear in what way Hanna's prayer is different from David's and accommodates the intuitions we have about those cases. I said earlier that Hanna's prayer is not directed to the past, and although it involves a mistake (Hanna not knowing that she is already pregnant) it isn't irrational. The fact that her prayer is unfitting but warranted explains in what way her prayer is similar, and in what way it is different, from David's prayer.

I said that praying for the past is wrong since the petitioner unwarrantedly treats the situation she is praying about as undetermined. At this point, it should be asked whether the idea of God's omniscience makes praying for the past fitting. In the first section, we saw that the idea that God knows that we will pray for something before we pray and takes it into account renders those prayers efficacious, but does it make them fitting and warranted? I also said that I take this to be a constraint on further explanations. If the third explanation does not hold about prayers for influencing the past through God's knowledge rather than changing it, then it doesn't do the work it should.

Luckily enough, it is obvious that even praying for the past while asking God to take those prayers in advance is unwarranted. For those prayers to be fitting or warranted, the situation in their focus must be undetermined when they are being done. The idea of fittingness is that responses have norms that govern what they are responding to when they are responding to it. The situation is already determined at the moment the prayer is being offered. Even if David's prayer already influenced the match's score, that does not mean that the score is undetermined now when the prayer is being offered. And since it is determined, the prayer is unfitting although it is efficacious and unwarranted because David knows he prays about something determined.

I admit that this is a surprising upshot. Even though the prayer is efficacious, it is unfitting to pray such a prayer. But this is a coherent upshot, and I believe an inevitable one. Since the prayed-for already happened – even if it happened because God knew I would pray – it isn't true to say that the prayer's focus can be influenced by the prayer. Instead, the prayer's focus had been influenced by God's knowledge of the future prayer. But when David is praying, it is no longer true that his prayer can influence the situation; it either did or did not. Consequently, praying for the past is unwarranted – and in this sense wrong – although it might be efficacious.

This is how the third explanation differs from the first one. The first explanation focuses on the efficacy of the prayer, and since prayers for the past might be efficacious, it fails to account for the intuition that something is wrong with them. In contrast, the third explanation centres on the fittingness of prayer. The fittingness of a prayer does not depend on its efficacy but on the way the prayer fits its focus. A prayer is fitting when what is being prayed about is undetermined. However, past events are already determined – even if the prayer played a role in bringing them about.

Of course, if Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) are right and God can change the past, praying for the past is about something alterable and undetermined. According to their view, it might be fitting and warranted to pray for the past. I'm not sure we should accept their view.[23] But even if we do accept it, Lebens and Goldschmidt themselves limit God's changing of the past to the eschaton. So, we might say that in most cases, God won't change the past. And if that is true, most situations are determined and prayer about them is unfitting.

Conclusion

I undertook the task of explaining why praying for the past seems wrong (to me, at least). I rejected two possible explanations. The first is that in praying for the past, we pray as if our prayer is efficacious while we know it isn't. This inconsistency is what is wrong in praying

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for the past. I rejected this explanation since there is a way to think of prayer for the past as efficacious without thinking that the situation is alterable or that God might change the past, something most of us believe isn't possible. All we need to accept is that God knows in advance that we will pray and takes it into account when determining what would happen.

The second explanation is more of a set of explanations. This explanation posits that in praying for the past, we violate a religious norm. Besides dealing with two versions of this explanation, I rejected this explanation on the grounds that it explains the wrongness of prayer in a different way than I understood it initially. The wrongness in praying for the past is closer to that of irrationality than of something bad being done. For the same reason, I think moral norms should also be rejected as an explanation for the wrongness in praying for the past.

Last, I offered my explanation. According to my explanation, prayer is governed by norms of fittingness. In praying, we should treat the situation in our prayer's focus properly. Prayer's focus is a situation in the petitioner concern that is undetermined. But prayer for the past is praying about something which no longer can be influenced; it is already determined. I argued that even accepting that prayer for the past is efficacious, this doesn't make the situation in the prayer's focus open to influence when the petitioner is praying. Hence, prayer for the past is wrong because it is an unwarranted response to the situation in the focus of prayer.

My conclusion is that prayer for the past is wrong because it is an unfitting response to the focus of prayer. However, this is not an all-things-considered judgement about praying for the past. My aim was to explain what is wrong with such prayers, and I have provided an explanation. Nevertheless, there may still be reasons to pray for the past, even if doing so violates norms of fittingness. One might argue that since prayer for the past can be efficacious, there are circumstances in which it is the right thing to do despite being unfitting. This parallels other fittingness-evaluable states – guilt, for example, might be the most admirable response in a given situation, even if it is not fitting.[24] This follows from the neutrality of fittingness with respect to other values, as discussed earlier. Ultimately, the decision of whether to pray for the past is a personal one, provided one considers all relevant factors, including fittingness.[25]

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Notes

1. For the supporters of praying for the past see: Lewis (1947) at 214: 'Thus, shocking as it may sound, I conclude that we can at noon become part causes of an event occurring at ten o'clock'; Dummett (1964, 341) begins his discussion about prayer for the past with 'the attitude of orthodox Jewish' that it is blasphemous to pray for the past and argue against it; Brown (1985) at 83: 'How can we make sense of this, given that we believe that events in the past *are* irreversible'; Flint (1997) at 231: 'however natural retrospective prayer may appear, isn't such activity essentially irrational?'; Timpe (2005) at 307: 'Can we make sense of past-direction impetrations without having to embrace backward causation?'; Mawson (2007) begins his paper with Lewis's view that prayer for the past is rational and then argues that it is rational even when one knows what obtained. For philosophers who conclude prayer for the past is wrong see: Geach (1969) at 89: 'there can be no impetratory prayer in regard to things already past at the time of the prayer'; Taylor (1990) begins with Dummett's argument that prayer for the past is reasonable and argue against it; Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) at 12: 'The Rabbis consider the prayer pointless, and therefore forbid it'.

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2. www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/praying-for-the-past-another-view; https://wesleyanarminian.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/can-god-answer-prayers-about-the-past/; www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ScR8h-xA70. I thank an anonymous referee for highlighting the need for real-life examples.
3. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.
4. For a discussion on the rationality of praying for outcomes one knows did not occur – such as praying that World War II never happened – see Mawson (2007). Mawson suggests that in such prayers, we are not asking God to change the past but rather to reveal that events were, in fact, as we wish them to be, and that we are mistaken in believing otherwise. He concludes that while some such prayers may be rational, others – particularly those involving a large body of evidence, such as World War II or the Battle of Waterloo – are irrational.
5. Lewis (1947) and Dummett (1964) argue that prayer for the past can be efficacious. Taylor (1990) offers a rejection of Dummett's argument and conclude that prayer for the past is necessarily inefficacious. Flint (1997) and Timpe (2005) offer renewed and more detailed arguments for the efficacy of prayer for the past.
6. There is a small chance that Hanna's prayer could be efficacious, and she might become pregnant with an additional baby. However, since this is a very rare possibility and, in the case I described it does not seem that Hanna is interested in having two children, I do not address this possibility.
7. This is largely agreed upon. Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) offer a view according to which God can change the past. If they are correct, prayer for the past is efficacious, and the first explanation becomes a non-starter. I discuss their view when considering the next two explanations.
8. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this possibility.
9. As Taylor (1990) makes clear, this idea means that the prayer has already influenced the state of events, not that it influences them now, after they are over. But the objection still holds: the important thing is that the prayer is efficacious. As long as it is efficacious, praying for the past does not involve inconsistent beliefs.
10. Timpe (2005) argues that, according to the fourth view, Openism, prayer for the past is inefficacious. Openism is the view that propositions about the future cannot be true or false, and for this reason, God cannot be said to know them. According to this view, God cannot know that David will pray and therefore cannot take it into account in advance. Hence, David's prayer is inefficacious, making the first explanation true under the assumption of Openism. My aim is to explain the wrongness of praying for the past while remaining neutral about theological assumptions. This is why I seek an explanation that is compatible with the other views about God's knowledge.
11. See also Mawson (2007) for a defence of the view that it is rational to pray even if one knows what happened and further discussion.
12. In a similar way, Lewis argues that our knowledge that a certain event did not happen is what makes it a 'sin against the duty of submission to God's known will' (1947, 214–215). One might argue that even praying for known events does not, in itself, express dissatisfaction with God's Providence. See Mawson (2007, 81–82). Similarly, praying for the past does not necessarily express distrust in God. A petitioner might believe that God has already brought about the best possible outcome – demonstrating trust in Him – while still praying so that God will have taken her prayer into account in advance. I am grateful to a reviewer for raising the issue of trust.
13. It might be that the third explanation is close to Geach's argument (Geach 1969) for why praying for the past is wrong. Geach writes: 'In using the imperative we represent the situation as still to be brought about, and in using the past tense we represent it as already *fait accompli*, one way or the other. These representations will not fit together' (Geach 1969, 90). However, Geach's discussion is more complex, and it seems anachronistic to interpret his argument in terms of fittingness as it is understood today. See Brown (1985) and Timpe (2005, 309–310) for a discussion of Geach's argument.
14. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting considering this possibility. Perhaps some readers might find the following verse from Isaiah (65, 24) as disclosing that there isn't anything inherently future-oriented in asking God: 'Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear'.
15. There is a controversy about what underlies the correctness conditions of emotions. Some believe that emotions have correctness conditions in virtue of being or involving representation (Tappolet 2016, Na'aman 2022). According to this view, it is the evaluative content of the emotion that renders it fitting or unfitting. Others deny that emotions involve representations of values and argue that fittingness conditions arise from the nature of the attitudes themselves, not their content (Timpe 2005). I remain neutral on this point. Later in the second subsection, I will show that, on either view, it is possible to apply the notion of fittingness to actions as well as emotions, and thus to consider prayer as having fittingness conditions.
16. The fact that prayer is an action is discussed in Smilansky (2012). Smilansky argues that, since prayer is an action, it must meet moral standards that mere emotional responses do not.
17. This way of putting things is compatible with the attitudinal view I presented in note 13. According to the representational view of fittingness, it can be said either that in prayer we represent the situation as having certain properties or that prayer is part of a larger narrative, which includes elements such as the prayer itself, emotions of fear or worry about what is being prayed for, and even physical reactions. This narrative has fittingness conditions

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in virtue of being representational, and prayer has fittingness conditions in virtue of being part of this narrative (for this view, see Na'aman 2022). The way I presented it in the text is shorter and easier to explain, but nothing crucial for my discussion depends on choosing this approach over the other.

18. Davison also calls it 'object', but I doubt he uses the term in the same sense that I do, as something the prayer is directed toward and represents. It is more likely that Davison has in mind something closer to 'target' or 'goal'.

19. The focus is what we may call the immediate concern of the prayer. If I pray to win the lottery because I want to get rich, and the lottery has already taken place but the results are not yet revealed, my prayer's focus is on the past, since the lottery has already occurred. This is true even though my general concern of becoming rich remains open. I thank Aaron Segal for pressing me to address this point.

20. Davison discusses a case of prayer without a target. This may suggest that the target of prayer is not necessarily a required object of it. This could be relevant to a discussion about what is the more essential object of prayer. However, I'm not sure that such an essential object must exist, and in any case, I do not wish to discuss this issue here.

21. Note that I'm not saying that the focus of prayer should be something we have influence over, but that it is open to our influence. The first might include influence on past events through God's knowledge. I deny this possibility, as it would require us to accept that prayer for past events one knows have occurred is fitting.

22. To sharpen my view on prayer's focus, a comparison might help. Hope, too, has a target and a focus. Hope's target is what is being hoped for, which is something possible and desirable (Milona and Stockdale 2018). Hope's focus is also a concern, but it seems that it isn't required for this concern to be undetermined. Arguably, we might hope for something in the past (Chignell 2013, 203–204). For example, hoping that I got the earrings I wanted for my birthday before opening the box. Prayer and hope are closely related in that they are both about a desirable outcome that might obtain in some way, but in praying, we try to influence that outcome, not only desire it. For this reason, hope is fitting when its focus is already determined, as long as the target is possible, but prayer is fitting only if its focus is still open for influence. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting a comparison with hope.

23. See Faul (2020) for an objection and Goldschmidt and Lebens (2020) for further discussion.

24. See D'Arms and Jacboson (D'Arms and Jacobson 2023, 171–173) for a discussion of Williams's famous lorry driver and the conclusion that he should feel guilt even though it is not fitting. The chapter as a whole explores and defends a pluralistic account of fittingness.

25. I thank an anonymous referee for making me see the need of this clarification.

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