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Partnership with God: a partial solution to the problem of petitionary prayer

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Abstract: **Why would God make us ask for some good He might supply, and why would it be right for God to withhold that good unless and until we asked for it? We explain why present defences of petitionary prayer are insufficient, but argue that a world in which God makes us ask for some goods and then supplies them in response to our petitions adds value to the world that would not be available in worlds in which God simply supplied such goods without our asking for them. This added value, we argue, is what we call 'partnership with God'.**

Introduction: contours of the problem

Why would God make us ask for some good He might supply, and why would it be right for God to withhold that good unless and until we asked for it? At least in regard to that good, it would seem that a world in which God simply supplied all appropriate goods to the world – without requiring His creatures to pray for them (henceforth we will call such a world NPW),[1] would be preferable to one in which God answers prayers, but allows the world not to enjoy all of the goods appropriate to it unless and until someone prays for them (henceforth, we will call this world PW). What if there is some significant delay between God's readiness to supply that good, and someone actually praying for it in PW – or worse, what if no-one ever does? In the meantime, PW is worse than it could be, and worse, it seems, than it *should* be.

Of course, nothing prevents God from supplying some goods to PW that would best be won through prayer even if no-one prays for them. But the problem must still be addressed: we cannot simply assume that all of the goods available as a result of prayers will always be prayed for in a timely way, and so it seems that if God answers (appropriate) petitionary prayers, our world will not always enjoy as much good (or less bad) as it could enjoy if God would simply supply those goods to us without prayer. But a God who withholds good(s) from the world

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might not seem to be a perfectly good God. As David Basinger has put it, 'With respect to our basic needs (good), it is never justifiable for God to withhold that which he can and would like to give us until petitioned' (Basinger (2004), 267).[2]

This worry obviously raises a version of the problem of evil, and we do not intend to respond directly to this more general problem herein. However, we will offer an explanation as to how, other things equal,[3] a world in which God refrains from bestowing goods to the world and His creatures, unless and until they ask for those goods in the right way – even if they do not always do so in a timely way – is actually a better world in at least one way than one in which He bestows them upon the world and His creatures without requiring them to be solicited by anyone in that world. It is our job in this paper to explain why, in other words, PW is better in at least one way than NPW, even if we assume that in PW those able to pray will not always do so in an appropriate or timely way – even, that is, granting that there will be some good things in NPW that will not also be present in PW.

For reasons which we will give in the next few sections, we do not think that the philosophers and theologians who have attempted to make this case have done so in a way that has been successful. We will not, however, attempt to make the further argument that the good we identify as possible only in PW, but not NPW, is sufficient to offset the ways in which NPW might be better than PW, because of the goods God would bestow without the need for prayer in NPW.[4]

Now, it may be supposed that in framing our question as narrowly as we do, we manage to restrict our attention to a question for which the answer is simply *obvious*.[5] Plainly one good that people can enjoy in PW is the good of getting what one asks for because one asked for it, rather than for some other reason. An example that reveals the value we have in mind here might go as follows.[6] Suppose S goes to her favourite restaurant and orders the Steak Tartare and a bottle of 1961 Petrus. The waiter, however, mixes up two orders and delivers to S what T ordered at another table. However, fortuitously, T also ordered the Steak Tartare and a bottle of 1961 Petrus. The waiter thus deprived S of the good of getting what she wanted because that was what she asked for, even if S nonetheless got what she wanted.

It may be objected that this answer to the problem is inadequate, however. What presumably matters most to S is that she gets the meal she asked for – were she appraised of the mix-up. Given that she was not denied the meal she sought, she might easily dismiss the loss of the other good as insignificant – or even take some added enjoyment from the peculiar coincidence. We might feel some investment in making sure that such mix-ups are avoided as much as possible, but presumably the ground for that investment would not be the loss of the good we have identified in this example, so much as to avoid distressing people by serving them meals *other* than what they ordered (or worse, serving those same meals to those who ordered them *after* having served them to others). So we

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suspect that the good added in PW, relative to NPW, is more weighty than the very modest good of being able to get what one asks for *because* one asked for it.

At any rate, the relevant good has not been obvious enough to have been given in any satisfactory form by any of the able philosophers and theologians who have taken up the issue. Part of the difficulty here may derive from that fact that many of the things that one might say about the goodness of petitionary prayer would also apply equally to NPW – after all, nothing prevents people from petitioning God in NPW, and those who did petition God in NPW in the appropriate ways would enjoy all of the benefits of getting what they asked for. Of course, they would have received those benefits anyway – even had they not prayed. A good God would presumably not gratuitously deceive His creatures, but nothing requires that God would have to be responsible for the belief, by those who prayed in NPW, that their prayers were being answered by God. Moreover, even if God was part of a deceit in this case, it does not follow that the deceit would be *gratuitous* – perhaps in His divine wisdom, God would judge that the best possible world for His creatures was one in which they supposed that He answered their prayers, even though He did not in fact do so.

So our problem is to determine what good, weightier than the good of getting what one asks for because one asked for it, might be instantiated in PW that is *not* instantiated in NPW. Since both prayer generally and petitionary prayer specifically might be a part of both worlds, it follows that many or even most of the benefits intrinsic to praying would be entirely available in both worlds. We contend, accordingly, that it is not simply obvious what *other* (weighty) good is instantiated in PW and not in NPW. We begin by surveying several of the best-known attempts to identify what this additional good might be, and showing why we find these attempts to be unsatisfactory. We will then turn to our own defence, which characterizes prayer as a way to engage in partnership with God.

Aquinas's proposed solution

Aquinas does not frame the problem of petitionary prayer as carefully or clearly as he does many of the other issues he ponders, and so his own proposal is less provided as a solution to the problem, perhaps, than an explanation of why Aquinas did not see prayer *as* a problem: '[T]hat [God] wishes to bestow certain things on us at our asking, is for the sake of our good, namely, that we may acquire confidence in having recourse to God, and that we may recognize in Him the Author of our goods' (*Summa Theologica* II, Q83, 2).[7]

There can be no question that recognizing God as the author of our goods counts as an advantage in Christian theology, but even so, Aquinas's observation is not yet sufficient as an answer to the problem of petitionary prayer. For one thing, given human ignorance (and egoism), there will be many examples of prayer in PW which petition God for things that, in His wisdom, He would

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recognize as bad for the world, for the one making the request, or for one or more of God's other creatures. So it is a serious concern in PW that Aquinas's observation might actually turn on its head. In a world that requires prayer – and most importantly, in which God only *sometimes* answers prayers[8] – those who pray may find that they are given what appear to them to be reasons for thinking that no-one is listening to their prayers. It may well be true, then, that *answered* prayers allow those who prayed to recognize God as the author of the goods requested in the prayer. But *unanswered* prayers – and indeed, even the idea that God would require us to pray – could well have the opposite effect. Nor does Aquinas seem to provide additional help in his observation that 'We pray not in order to change the divine disposition but for the sake of acquiring by petitionary prayer what God has disposed to be achieved by prayer' (*Summa Theologica* II, q83, 2).

One worry with such an account is that it flirts with determinism, and would thus undermine human freedom. Of course, Aquinas does not think that his account eliminates free will, and so he supposes that predestination or divine foreknowledge (or atemporal knowledge of what is to us the future) is compatible with human free will, though he provides no clear defence of such a view in his works. But even if we can supply the account Aquinas requires, a further problem reveals itself in Aquinas's proposal. As Eleonore Stump puts it, in Aquinas's view,

> Prayer should not be thought of as an attempt to get God to do something which he would not otherwise do but rather as an effort to produce an appropriate and preordained cause which will result in certain effects since God in his providence has determined things to be so. Now surely there can be no doubt that, according to Christian doctrine, God wants men to pray and answers prayers; and consequently it is plain that God's plan for the world includes human prayers as causes of certain effects. The difficulty lies in explaining how such a doctrine makes sense. Why *should* prayers be included in God's plan as causes of certain effects? And what sense is there in the notion that a perfect and unchangeable God, who disposes and plans everything, fulfills men's prayers asking him to do one thing or another? Thomas's argument, I think, gives no help with these questions and so gives no help with this problem of petitionary prayer. (Stump (1979), 86)

In our view, for petitionary prayer to be efficacious as 'causes of certain effects', it really must be the case that at least some prayers induce God to some action that *He would not take were it not for the prayer*. Otherwise, the world in question reduces to some version of NPW, where God would do everything He could to improve the world whether anyone prays for those goods or not. Given the connection between the exercise of free will and the consequences of that exercise, it could well be that some good is brought into being by prayer even in NPW: for example, the one praying may feel better afterwards. Since this good could be achieved no less in NPW than in PW, therefore, this cannot be the sort of good that shows why PW is a better world than NPW. Only if prayer can have

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the effect of inducing God to act in ways that *He would not do, were it not for the prayer* can a fully adequate defence of PW be made. Aquinas's account, then, seems incapable of providing such an account.

Stump's and Murray's defences of prayer

Stump's own solution to the problem relies on God's love for us, despite the very unequal relationship we have with God, who is infinitely greater and more perfect:

> [I]f the relationship between God and human beings is to be one which at least sometimes can be accurately represented as the love of true friendship for both parties to the relationship, then there is a problem for both parties to the relationship, because plainly it will not be easy for there to be friendship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, finite, imperfect person. (Stump (1979), 86–87)

The great inequalities of the relationship, however, can be mitigated by petitionary prayer, in Stump's view. She makes her case mainly through the use of putatively analogous cases – in the first case, friendship between two children at opposite ends of the economic spectrum, where the 'slum child' risks being so

> … overcome by the advantages or superiority of his 'friend' that he becomes simply a shadowy reflection of the other's personality, a slavish follower who slowly loses all sense of his own tastes and desires and will. … . Secondly, in addition to the danger of becoming completely dominated, there is the danger of becoming spoiled in the way that members of a royal family in a ruling house are subject to. Because of the power at their disposal in virtue of their connections, they often become tyrannical, willful, indolent, self-indulgent, and the like. The greater the discrepancy in status and condition between the two friends, the greater the danger of even inadvertently overwhelming and oppressing or overwhelming and spoiling the lesser member of the pair. … [I]f God wants some kind of true friendship with men, he will have to find a way of guarding against both kinds of overwhelming. (Stump (1979), 87)

The way God manages to mitigate such undesirable results, according to Stump, is to require petitionary prayer for some of the benefits He wishes to bestow on His friends, and also to have it be that not all petitioners' prayers will be answered, lest the one praying come to think of himself 'grandly as having God on his side' (Stump (1979), 87). Stump goes on to show how the requirement that the inferior must *ask* helps to guard against God overwhelming His human friends. At this point, Stump offers yet another analogy – in this case, to a teacher wishing to help a student, but wary of overwhelming the student. If the student *asks* for help, the teacher gives it gladly. But the teacher must not pursue the student and force with 'meddling interference' (Stump (1979), 88). A final analogy follows, in which a father requires a healthy and normal child a certain kind of assistance only if the child solicits the help, whereas he provides much more for a child who is 'blind, deaf, dumb, and suffering … other maladies' to the point where the child 'does not even know he has a father' (Stump (1979), 89).[9]

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Plainly, one problem with such arguments by analogy is the lack of precision inherent in putatively analogous cases, for the relationship between God and humans is plainly not *exactly* like that of a rich friend and a poor one, or a teacher and student, or a father and healthy normal son (or for that matter, a father and a severely handicapped son). It is a serious concern about such analogies that their inexactitude may mask serious problems – problems of enough magnitude to overturn the superficial sense to which the analogy was intended to apply. The rich friend/poor friend analogy, for example, does not seem to diminish the propensity for overwhelming if we add the very condition Stump thinks solves the problem. Forcing the poor friend to ask for the rich friend's assistance – with only occasional or intermittent success – does not seem to us to be a very likely way to reduce the overwhelming disparity between the two friends. Instead, it seems more likely to call that disparity to mind in their interactions, and make the wealthier friend's superior economic standing a ground for resentment and conflict. It might be actually better for them to agree that they will always function *exactly as equals*, for the sake of their friendship, if the wealthy friend can allow himself to forego some of his more luxurious tastes during the times he spent with his friend.

Even if we take Stump's analogies at face value, other problems reveal themselves in each case. In the case of the two friends, the risk to the poorer friend seems most of all to be a risk to his character. But nothing requires that the poor friend must already have a character that is so vulnerable to corruption as to require the richer friend to manipulate their economic relationships in the way Stump's view requires. Why should we suppose that the poor friend would not proudly refuse his wealthier companion's assistance or gifts, thinking, as Aristotle famously does, that friendship is best when it is grounded in shared virtue, rather than in usefulness (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.3)? Or for that matter, why can two friends not agree with Aristotle that money is of purely instrumental value (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5), and that such values should never jeopardize more important ones, and thus mutually vow to use the richer friend's wealth only when its uses do not threaten the corruption of either's character? And when we apply this same analogy to ourselves, why should we suppose that God owes it to us to treat us with the assumption that we do *not* have the strength and dignity we might wish from the poorer friend in Stump's case?

Similar concerns apply to Stump's case of the teacher and student, which also seems to presuppose serious defects of character in the student. Stump's student is forced to ask for the teacher's help, and would respond to more active intervention by the teacher with 'more or less polite variations on ''Who asked you?'' and ''Mind your own business''' – responses that Stump regards as 'healthy and just' (Stump (1979), 88). Of course, we can imagine cases in which a teacher could oppress a student with too much attention, but we fail to see why a teacher reaching out to a student who has not (yet) asked for help deserves to be told

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(even politely) to mind his own business! It is not always possible for teachers to be as proactive as they might like to be with students in need. But the best students not only deserve such attention – they also are appropriately grateful when they receive it. Once again, we are disinclined to think that the student ingrate in Stump's analogy provides a fitting analogy to a good human being's relationship with God. In each case, Stump's analysis seems not only to presuppose, but actually to *require* that the human side of the friendship cannot exemplify the degree of strength of character and moral decency that Christianity is supposed to encourage in Christians.

This same sort of objection applies to the defence of prayer given by Michael J. Murray, who notes that petitionary prayer can help us to overcome a certain tendency to idolatry:

> Petitionary prayer can short-circuit this tendency by forcing the believer to realize that the goods she receives have their source beyond human agency. While her food might still come from the grocer's hand and her drink from a tap, it is still God who brings the rain, provides the chemist with the intellect required to thwart white-fly infestations, and gives the physical strength to the assembly-worker who constructs the tractors which harvest the wheat. With each petition, the believer is made aware the she is directly dependent on God for her provisions in life. (Murray (2004), 246)[10]

As much as petitionary prayer might have such effects on those who practise it, this seems to us to provide no defence of the sort required. For, as we said in the introduction, nothing prevents these same benefits from being equally available to the denizens of NPW, who can also pray and thus remind themselves of their dependence upon God. Moreover, it is anything but plain why prayer is the *only* or *best* way to counteract the tendency to idolatry. Why could sincere Christians not achieve the same result simply by reminding themselves – perhaps several times a day, if necessary – of their utter dependence upon God's grace? Finally, even if it could be shown that prayer really was the most effective way to combat idolatry, why should we accept Murray's rather bleak appraisal of the human condition – why should we suppose that we could not reach a point in which we would not need much more of this 'treatment' because we became such good Christians that we significantly diminished our risk of succumbing to idolatry. As we found with Stump's defence, Murray's seems to require too negative a view of human character to explain why it would be good *even for the best of Christians* to engage in petitionary prayer.

Murray's other defence of what he calls 'self-directed' petitionary prayer (that is, prayers that petition God for some benefit to the petitioner him- or herself) derives from his reflections on the story in 1 Kings, 18.16–39 in which God provides a 'miraculous display' in response to Elijah's prayer. 'We can generalize from this example, and see that God can teach us a number of things about his own good nature and purposes in the world by responding one way or another to our

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petitions' (Murray (2004), 249). But here we encounter again the problem that the very same lessons seem entirely possible for those who exist in NPW. Nothing prevents God from making 'miraculous displays' in NPW, whenever and wherever such displays will be best for those who observe them.[11]

Murray goes on to consider several reasons for thinking that petitioning God on others' behalf also adds value to PW. God would wish to 'make provision of certain goods contingent upon corporate requests' in order to generate 'interdependence among believers – one that fosters the sort of unity that God demands of the church' (Murray (2004), 250). In addition, such prayers help to make the 'community of believers aware of each other's needs so that they themselves can meet them' (Murray (2004), 251). Murray does not explain, however, why he thinks that the first of these benefits can come only or best where petitionary prayer is efficacious, and it is not at all clear to us how such a case could be made. Instead, it seems to us that an interdependent community among believers would likely be the result in any such community that recognized their own individual limitations, relative to achieving self-sufficiency. This is precisely what leads to the development of human communities in the first place, according at least to Plato (*Republic*, 369b) and Aristotle (*Politics*, I.2). Perhaps a greater sense of unity is required, in a Christian perspective, but those who make that their aim can certainly find reasonable ways to pursue that aim. Perhaps, too, no human community could actually achieve that aim without God's help. But this provides no defence of petitionary prayer either; after all, God would supply such help even if no-one asked for it in NPW.

Murray actually realizes that people could become aware of each other's needs 'even if prayer is not efficacious' (Murray (2004), 252). But he argues that in such a case 'believers might be more reluctant to share their needs with one another' (Murray (2004), 252). We see no reason for thinking this would be the case – precisely on the ground we mentioned above. Given that we all lack self-sufficiency, that recognition would appear to be a good ground to the most sensible of us to undertake to live in the sorts of communities in which we can make our needs known to others, and in which others may reasonably be seen as inclined to give assistance to those who need it. Failure to make one's needs known is plainly not a prudent strategy for those who are in fact interdependent. Even if petitionary prayer can somehow expedite such prudence, we should not imagine that reasonable people would cease to be prudent in NPW.[12]

Taliaferro and the good of mediation

In Taliaferro's proposed solution, the advantage PW presents, relative to NPW, is that PW exemplifies a good not exemplified in NPW, which Taliaferro identifies as a 'mediatory good': 'the valuable mediation of a good agent' (Taliaferro (2007), 621). Taliaferro is aware of the problems of overwhelming that

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grounded Stump's account, however: 'Not all mediation is good. The overbearing parent who insists on mediating *all* interactions between her children may well undermine their freedom, sense of self-worth, and confidence. But some mediation can be of great value because it is part of a greater good of friendship and respectful love' (Taliaferro (2007), 621).

As we found in Stump's defence, Taliaferro employs an analogy to make his case. In his example, we are to consider a case of two friends. One is considering adopting a child. Taliaferro asks us to consider two ways in which a decision to adopt might be reached. In one, the aspiring parent discovers all of the necessary facts, deliberates carefully, and goes through with the adoption. In the other, the aspiring parent cannot reach a conclusion, but then receives assistance and reassurance from a friend, whose mediation thus helps to bring about the decision to adopt. As Taliaferro understands the two cases,

> Both cases may have equal value on so many fronts, and the first may have even greater worth insofar as we can imagine it required more courage to undertake the adoption solo rather than in the company of a friend. Even so, the second case has great value in the loving mediation. (Taliaferro (2007), 622).

Let us set aside our more general concern about analogical reasoning here, for something is amiss with the actual analogy Taliaferro has offered for what it is supposed to do. Even if we acknowledge that the mediation in the second case is a separate and significant value, *nothing* in the case requires that the mediation *must be petitioned*. Plainly, the friend's 'loving mediation' could just as easily (and perhaps even more generously) have been offered without petitioning – or perhaps even in the face of some embarrassed resistance by the aspiring parent to having the friend get involved. So from the fact that the mediation adds value, *nothing* follows about petitionary prayer – after all, God could lovingly mediate even if He were not asked to do so.

Moreover, the single case that Taliaferro provides to distinguish PW from NPW is not really the sort of case a complete defence of petitionary prayer requires. Taliaferro asks us to compare a case in which the successful evacuation of roughly 300,000 troops from Dunkirk in May and June of 1940 (which Winston Churchill deemed a 'miracle') was 'brought about, in part, by God in response to petitionary prayer' (Taliaferro (2007), 621). This we are told to contrast with a world in which

> … there is the same amount of good and evil, but none of the good that occurs or evil that is prevented is due to petitionary prayer. So, in this world, imagine that there was also a successful evacuation of the same number of troops, but this was not due to God's response to petitionary prayer. (Taliaferro (2007), 621)

Taliaferro claims that the first world has a 'mediatory good' the second world lacks. But we fail to see why this is the sort of case that is required, because nothing in the way he presents it prevents the second case from being a 'valuable

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mediation of a good agent' (Taliaferro (2007), 621) – in the second case, God's intervention (though not in response to petitionary prayer, but instead in response to the dire circumstances of the troops) may still be a critical part of the explanation of how the troops managed to be evacuated. *Whether or not* anyone actually happened to pray for the troops' evacuation, a witness to the event (for example Winston Churchill) might correctly thank God for His loving mediation in the troops' desperate time of need. Even if we grant the central tenet of Taliaferro's account, which is really a defence of why a world in which there is divine mediation by a loving God is preferable to a world in which there is no such mediation – call these options MW for 'meditation world' and NMW for 'non-mediation world' – a defence of MW is not tantamount to a defence of PW, for NPW could also be an MW. Our question, therefore remains, despite Taliaferro's attempted answer: why would God *make us ask* for some good he might supply, and why would it be right for God to *withhold that good unless and until we asked for it*?

Our own solution: partnership with God

We have already given our criticism of Taliaferro's defence of petitionary prayer, but our own defence actually expands upon an observation Taliaferro makes in his defence. He notes: 'In the case of Dunkirk, I suggest that the Petitionary World includes the value of many people cooperating and contributing to the miracle. Given that the evacuation is good, then the well-intentioned seeking to participate and help facilitate the evacuation through God's aid is (I suggest) a further good' (Taliaferro (2007), 622).

This observation seems to us to indicate a very different good than the mediatory good on which Taliaferro seems to base his general defence, which, as we showed above, is actually compatible with a version of NPW. In his case, Taliaferro seems to limit the efficacy of the petitioner's participation to the offering of the prayer, but even so, in these words he gestures to the value of partnership with God. By 'partnership' we mean the commitment to share in the good works of God, as far as our ability to do so allows. Partnership, we contend, is central to the value of petitionary prayer. A pledge of partnership entails the petitioner's genuine desire in obeying, loving, and sharing the ways of God in his or her earthly life. By obeying God the petitioner acts in concord with God, which increases and grows the good will of the petitioner in future actions. By loving God and one's fellow human beings, the petitioner gains motivation in willing and doing good to others. By sharing the way of God with others the petitioner expands these goods to his earthly neighbours so as to increase good thoughts and deeds on earth. Therefore, a theistic conception of petitionary prayer should include an earnest commitment to partnership in God's good works.

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Even in cases in which the petitioner cannot conceive of a way he or she could be engaged in the good aim of the petition, and even if there can be, as a matter of fact, no such participation from the petitioner, we contend that a vow of partnership should be central to the sincere act of petitioning.[13] For without an implicit pledge of partnership a prayer is actually a request for God to *serve* us in some way, rather than to give His *assistance*. While still technically a petitionary prayer, such a case would be as if we prayed: 'Please God, do as I would like to see done – even though I have not the conviction or dedication to do anything to promote your good work!' When the good Christian petitions God to, 'Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us', the petition would surely count as spiritually defective (at best) if the petitioner was not willing to take whatever measures appropriate to *acquire* his or her 'daily bread', or as much as possible to *merit* the forgiveness of God. Accordingly, an implicit vow of partnership, we contend, adds significant value to a sincere petitionary prayer.

Even what might be called 'lazy prayers', however – those in which the one praying makes and intends no actual vow of partnership in God's good works – actually engage in some degree of partnership nonetheless, though, as we have said, it is at best only a defective version of such. For even when we simply seek God's service in something we perceive as a good to be achieved (rather than seeking God's assistance in the pursuit of that good), we still engage in a limited way in agency intended to secure that good – simply by making our request to God. As such, the added good of petitionary prayer we have identified here is present even in the defective instances of lazy prayers. But to this minimal sort of moral agency, a significant addition of value is present in cases in which it is God's *assistance*, rather than simply His *service*, that we ask for. This would be the fullest realization of the value of partnership with God.

Let us, then, return to our original distinction between PW and NPW. Consider the Dunkirk example given in Taliaferro's essay. In PW, the evacuation is a response of God to the petitionary prayer. It is worthwhile to consider what actually happens with the people who pray (in this case, those who pray for the evacuation of the troops). First of all, they wish that the evacuation (which is a good) will be actualized. With this hope, they turn to God and pray. In their prayers, they recognize their trust in God, but in the best cases also recognize their own responsibilities of partnership. What this requires of them, they proclaim to God by praying as they do, is that they not only recognize that the evacuation of the troops would be a good thing, they also invite God to reveal to them any way in which they might help the troops to be evacuated.

Perhaps, at the time of the prayer, they humbly perceive no way in which they might assist the troops. By proclaiming the value of the evacuation to God, they not only contribute personally to achieving what they value (by taking it upon themselves to request assistance from God), but also at least implicitly offer

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themselves as servants to the divine will. If God reveals some other way for them to assist the troops (or perhaps indicates some other service they can provide), they pledge themselves to providing whatever assistance they can. We claim this same partnership should be implicit in petitionary prayer. We do not simply ask that God's will be done, nor do we simply indicate our own judgement that it would be good if God were to provide His services in achieving something we perceived as good; we also proclaim to God that we offer ourselves as His instruments, if He should choose us to serve, in the enactment of His will in His answers to our prayers.

It is not enough, we claim, to indicate by petitioning God that we find something worthy of divine assistance. A petitionary prayer, as we have said, is not merely the expression of a desire, or a proclamation of the recognition of some value. True partnership is not instantiated by one who is willing to sit idly by as God does His good works, even when a way to assist the divine effort is evident to the petitioner. By asking God, then, we also (at least implicitly) offer Him *our* services, however humble they may be; we do not merely ask God for *His* services. And only in a world in which our prayers may be answered can God not only accept partnership, but also acknowledge His acceptance to us – for without any indication of such acceptance, we should never have any reason to think that we have joined with God in His good works.

By engaging in partnership (even lazily, but especially when we do so more actively), we participate in positive moral agency in a way that would not be possible in NPW, for in NPW nothing good would really be ours to achieve (with or without God's assistance). In PW, however, we collaborate with God, as much as is possible for human beings, in God's good works. Were there not any good that we could have a role in bringing about (which requires, thus, that our world not be an optimal world, for in such a world, there would be nothing we could improve), we might be metaphysically free, but unable to engage in genuine moral agency. By allowing our world to be improvable in some ways, God allows us to participate in positive moral agency.[14] And by listening to and answering prayers, God allows us to extend our agency to places where we would not otherwise be able to act – at least by acting in such a way as to collaborate with God in undertaking some improvement to the world that would be wholly out of reach for us *as agents* in NPW.

Moreover, in serving God in whatever ways we can, we also develop the right habits for future actions, for as moralists from the time of Aristotle have recognized, we habituate good action by repeatedly engaging in such action. By sharing in the way of God the good Christian expands and increases such goods, insofar as he or she can. This partnership is manifested in the loving relationship between the petitioners and their fellows; by sharing this love they spread their good will and good deeds and serve as role models for others to follow in actualizing a better possible world.

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If sincere petitionary prayer implies at least an implicit vow of partnership, it follows that a world in which such vows are made – and recognized and rewarded by God, as appropriate – is at least in that respect a better world than one in which God does not respond to the prayers in which such vows are made. Petitioners acting in concord with God bring extra good to the world, by the enhancement of good will, the actualization of good works, and the expansion of good works to include others. None of these good effects, we claim, would be possible to the same degree without the sincere vow of partnership that may only be implicit in, but which we find as a significant feature in sincere petitionary prayer.

Concluding remarks

Even if what we have argued is correct, as we said at the very beginning of this paper, unless we imagine PW to be a world in which every creature always asks in a timely way for the goods that can be achieved through that creature's prayers, PW will by its very nature be less optimal than NPW with regard to the goods that God can bestow upon the world, because there will at least be periods of time, in PW, in which God fails to supply some goods to the world that He does supply to NPW, because these goods have not yet been sincerely petitioned in PW in prayers. In this paper, we have argued for a good that would at least to some degree compensate, in PW, for these (at least temporarily) absent goods. This compensation, we have claimed, is God's gift to us of not just metaphysical freedom, but the actual capacity for positive moral agency – the real ability to play some role in improving our world.

Whether this compensation is fully adequate to make PW preferable all-things-considered to NPW will be a matter of several factors we have not addressed herein, including at least the magnitude of the goodness of the absent goods (or the badness of their absence in PW when they are absent),[15] whether omnibenevolence requires an optimization of good, or only something less than that,[16] and surely also just how long God will allow these goods to remain missing in PW before either someone sincerely petitions God for the missing goods or else God decides to supply it (as in NPW) without requiring petitioning. Of course, in such a case, God might also provide some way of nudging those inclined to prayer into praying for what they should – calling a petitioner's attention to something in need of improvement would not interfere in our freedom or agency. We have also not addressed herein the important epistemological question of how we might know when and if God has actually answered a petitionary prayer.[17] We have not (or at least not intentionally) addressed any of these additional factors in this paper, and thus our defence of petitionary prayer has been only a limited one.

Even so, we contend that the defence we have offered has significant advantages over those provided by other philosophers and theologians. Other

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defences of petitionary prayer (particularly Stump's and Murray's) have focused upon the development and sustaining of the right sorts of relationships between God and human beings and among human beings themselves. It is a general weakness of such accounts that they tend both to overlook the possibility of achieving such relationships in ways other than prayer, and also tend to presuppose too great a degree of various defects in human character – defects of a sort Christianity seems resolved to overcome. It surely must not be that a proper defence of petitionary prayer would make it less valuable (or even not at all valuable) to the best of Christians – those who have actually achieved to a worthy extent the many Christian virtues.

One advantage of our account, in fact, in preference to others, is that it would seem likely that the prayers of the very best Christians would be more likely to be answered than those of the less worthy, for the partnership of the best Christians might reasonably be held to be more reliable and more effective than that of those with less dedication. Of course, even the best Christians will err, for to err is human, as the saying goes, and therefore even the best of Christians may sometimes ask for what God, in His infinite wisdom, would recognize as less optimal than some alternative. But we have argued that a benevolent God would (all other things being equal) desire a world in which the partnership that is a feature of such prayers would receive divine acknowledgement, acceptance, and reward. Far from requiring improvable human defect, we claim, the best prayers of the best Christians would also be the best embodiments and enactments of the very values God would most want increased in our world.

This gives some prima facie reason, then, to think that in the best of worlds, partnership (and the promise of it implicit in petitionary prayer) would actually be responsible for some of the good in that world. In other words, we believe we have given at least some prima facie reason to think that in the best of worlds, a good God would wait for us to commit ourselves freely and earnestly to His will, and would acknowledge and accept our commitment, and support us when we acted upon it.[18]

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Notes

1. We take these ways of identifying the relevant two worlds from Taliaferro (2007).
2. See also Basinger (1983) and (1995). Other expressions of this concern are expressed in Davison (2009), 292–293 and in Veber (2007).
3. By 'other things equal' we do not mean simply to stipulate that there would not be at least some goods in NPW not (or not yet) present in PW, namely all those good things that have not (yet) been prayed for in PW that God would supply without prayer in NPW. In respect of these goods, other things will presumably *not* be equal between PW and NPW – for they could only be equal with regard to these goods if we add the additional assumption that in PW each creature always prays in a timely fashion for whatever goods are available through that creature's prayers. Although a logically possible instance of a world in which God answers petitionary prayers, we may assume that our own world is not this instance, even if ours is also an instance of a world in which petitionary prayer is efficacious. So we assume that our world at least sometimes lacks at least some of the goods enjoyed by the denizens of NPW. By stipulating that other things are equal between PW and NPW, we only mean to stipulate that the only significant differences between PW and NPW are those to be explained by the efficacy of prayer in PW and its inefficacy in NPW and whether or not someone in PW has prayed for the goods available to both worlds – through prayer in PW and given without need for prayer in NPW.
4. For a debate on whether the added good in PW compensates for all the good that is automatically supplied in NPW, see Murray (2004) and Basinger (2004).
5. In a sense, this seems to be the gist of the defence of prayer given in Hoffman (1985a), who tries to show that none of the most plausible arguments that might be given against petitionary prayer are sound. If there can be no credible criticisms of petitionary prayer, there is no need to defend it. We are not convinced, however, that criticisms of petitionary prayer must share all of the assumptions Hoffman rebuts. See Stump (1985) and Hoffman's reply to Stump (1985b), all in the same volume.
6. We are very grateful to Tim Mawson for supplying us with this example.
7. As we will show, below, Murray appears to repeat this point as a defence of prayer, without citing Aquinas (see Murray (2004), 246–247).
8. For our purposes here, we will use the expression 'answers prayers' to mean the same as 'doing what the one praying has asked for'. Obviously, 'No' can be an answer to a petition, as well, but this is not the sort of case we are interested in here.
9. Murray concurs with Stump's account, despite acknowledging that there are 'a number of problems with the parent-child analogy' (Murray (2004), 254), and so attempts to give several other arguments in defence of petitionary prayer, to which we will turn shortly.
10. As we noted earlier, this appears to us to duplicate Aquinas's own defence of prayer at *Summa Theologica* II, Q83, 2.
11. This same response would apply to the defence of prayer provided in Murray & Meyers, where they claim that answered prayer show believers that their wishes are in accord with the divine will, whereas unanswered prayers show that the petition was not (Murray & Meyers (1994), 319). Given equal access to 'miraculous displays', however, it seems that God could instruct His creatures just as effectively in

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NPW as in PW. In NPW, moreover, believers would receive such instruction without having even to ask for it! This same response applies as well to the defence of prayer given in Allen 1971, according to which petitionary prayer helps us to develop a moral concern for others. We see no reason why direct divine injunction (which could occur in NPW) would not be at least as effective.

12. Other objections to the general kind of approach offered by Stump & Murray are provided in Basinger (1995) and (2004).
13. In our view, the positive moral agency enacted in partnership is direct. Others have argued for a more indirect form of agency. See, for example, Masek, who gives the example of praying for hurricane victims: '[M]y prayer could start a chain of events that helps the hurricane victims. Perhaps my prayer for the hurricane victims makes me more aware of their suffering, which leads me to donate money to help them. My friend might see this action and donate money, and his friend might see this action and do likewise' (Masek (2000), 279). In this case, it is plainly the donations that help the victims, rather than the prayer itself. In our view, however, the petitioner directly assists the victims, by collaborating in any way possible with God in relieving the victims' suffering. This obviously extends to cases in which there might be no *other* way for a human being to help those in need, which is not the case in Masek's example. Masek worries about this other sort of case, and contends that 'some of the prayer's benefits might occur in the afterlife' (Masek (2000), 279–280). Again, our account allows the disciple to engage in positive moral agency through helping those in need more directly, if only through the assistance provided by petitioning for God's intervention.
14. In this remark we realize that we also provide a very incomplete reply to many versions of the argument from evil: In our view, a benevolent God would prefer a world in which human beings could practise genuine moral agency, but such is possible only in a world that is improvable. We do not claim that this observation is adequate for explaining all of the apparent evil in the world, however.
15. On which, see Basinger (1995) and (2004), who insists that the absent goods must not be what he calls 'basic goods'. His conception of these seems to us debatable, but this is a debate best kept for another time.
16. On which, see e.g. Adams (1972); Basinger (2004), 260; Hasker (1992); Stump (1985).
17. For a description of this problem, see Davison (2009), 293–298. Presumably, any adequate answer to this question would require some combination of Christian humility (lest we suppose that God has answered our prayers when in fact He has not done so), and Christian hope (lest we despair of the idea that He might even consider hearing and answering our petitions).
18. We are indebted to Scott Davison, Robert Gould, and William Rottschaefer for reading and criticizing an earlier draft of this paper, and especially to Tim Mawson, who served as the referee for this journal and whose comments and criticisms of our penultimate draft were extraordinarily helpful and apt. None of these is in any way responsible, however, for any errors or infelicities that remain herein.

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