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THE IMMORALITY OF PRAYER

Ardon Lyon

It's no surprise that one shouldn't pray for bad things to happen, for it's always wicked to attempt to bring about evil. But perhaps surprisingly one shouldn't pray for good things either. For if there is an Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omni-Benevolent Deity who intervenes at all in the workings of the world, then He will do whatever is best anyway, and if you pray for what He wouldn't otherwise have done then it must, perhaps unknown to you, be wrong. If there is no God then He will not answer your prayers, although they might be efficacious in other ways.

Yes – that's right. I aim to show that *all* prayer is morally objectionable, even for things which just about any reasonable person would agree are good.

In a recent article in *Think*, Saul Smilansky argued that it is morally wrong to pray for things which themselves are morally wrong.[1] Although this is merely a shortened version of an article previously published in *Ratio*, his conclusion is hardly surprising. After all, it is always morally wrong to do what is morally wrong, so it surely must be morally wrong to try to bring about what is morally wrong, and praying that it will occur is an attempt to make that thing happen. Of course if there is no God to answer one's prayers, then one's prayers are likely to be inefficacious, but that is nothing to the point.

Of the three examples that Smilansky considers, perhaps the least arguable is where he considers a person below an avalanche which is bearing down on him, who prays to God that He (or She or It – from now on He), will divert the

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avalanche onto a village below, killing lots of people, so that he is saved. That surely would be a bad thing to do. But suppose the avalanche is bearing down on the village and I pray to God to divert it onto me, thereby saving many presumably innocent people in the village. Surely that would be morally heroic, wouldn't it? If it is considered that I may be doing this in order to be thought heroic, then why not pray that the avalanche be diverted so that nobody is killed? Surely nobody would argue that this is morally objectionable. But I shall argue that, perhaps surprisingly, it is.

It isn't true that if there is no God, then one's prayers can have no effect. If I am in a terrible situation, for example am very ill, and pray 'God, please give me strength', then I may be strengthened even if there is no God to help me. That is, the very act of praying may have a psychological effect on one, and may even help one to overcome illness. And if one prays for the help or health of another, and he or she knows about it, then that also may help them even if there is no God. Of course it also may not, and could even have completely the opposite effect on them.

Before addressing the main point of this article we need to consider some relevant aspects of morality and of the nature of God. First, a small point of clarification. Religious prayers, in the Western tradition, usually contain *thanks* to the Deity as well as requests, whereas in non-religious contexts to 'pray' means – or more usually meant, i.e. when used in the past – to *ask,* not to thank. Thus 'I pray you (prithee) pass the salt' never meant 'Thank you for the salt'. My argument is only against prayers to an all good, omnipotent and omniscient deity in the sense of requests, not thanks. Thanks may be empirically or even logically inappropriate, but they are not immoral.

Secondly, where I wrote in the second paragraph above that it is always morally wrong to do what is morally wrong, I didn't mean that one can never be in a position where one morally ought to do something which in itself is morally objectionable, only that if the only alternative is to do something which is even worse, then one should do what is the

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least morally objectionable of the two (or more). No blame should attach to you for doing that: rather, you should be praised for courageously doing what *in itself* is morally bad. An example fairly often given is that of a captain of a ship in war who can either stop to pick up drowning survivors, or leave them to their fate in order to save more people on board the ship as well as others in a convoy. Of course he can make a mistake about what would have happened in the future if he had acted otherwise, but morally one should only be held responsible for what it is reasonable in the circumstances to believe – and if one has very little time to make a decision, then this too should be taken into account. So it is always morally right to do what is *overall* morally right, even if this requires doing something which, in itself, is morally wrong.

About such cases I should point out another problem about which philosophers and others are sometimes mistaken. As explained above, it may be that action A is morally better than action B, or that B is morally better than A, even though both are morally objectionable. If it is possible that A is better than B, and also *vice versa*, then whether or not both are good or bad in themselves there must be cases where alternatives A and B are equally good, or equally bad, and one has to do one of them but cannot do both. Some people appear to think that this can never happen, and one just needs to think harder in order to find out which is the better. But this is a mistake. Consider two physical bodies X and Y; X might be heavier than Y or Y might be heavier than X, but also they might be of equal weight. Similarly, the world is – in this case unfortunately – such that two incompatible *actions* may be of equal moral worth but we cannot do both. In such cases *it cannot be morally better to do one rather than the other*. A famous case considered by Sartre is where a young man in Nazi occupied France has to decide whether to leave his home to join the Resistance, or to stay and look after his aged and helpless mother. Doing either is good, but either entails not doing the other, and thus doing something bad.

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Let us assume that the failure is equally bad in either case. We still ought to feel sad if we choose to carry out action A that we didn't, and couldn't also, carry out B, or if we choose B, then sad that we couldn't also do A. But we shouldn't be blamed for it, or made to feel guilty, no matter how agonizing the choice, for *ex hypothesi* they are morally equivalent.[2]

Such cases should be distinguished from those where more thought would or might get us to realise that A is, after all, better than B, or *vice versa*, and also cases where, given the situation *at the moment*, there is nothing to choose between them, but (it is may be reasonable to believe that) how things will turn out in the future mean that action A is (even now) better than B or *vice versa*.

Having tried briefly to clarify the situation concerning which actions are morally good, then before assessing the morality of prayer we must turn to questions about the alleged nature of God. According to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God is supposed to be all-Powerful, all-Good, and all-Knowing; I am not arguing against prayers to a different sort of alleged deity. Although at least the Old Testament makes some claims which are incompatible with these three epithets, stating for example that God is jealous, kills perfectly innocent babes such as the Egyptian first-born etc, I shall ignore these difficulties. Some people have argued, however, that the three epithets about His alleged perfections are themselves incompatible with each other.

It has been claimed that even without the other two characteristics God cannot be all-Powerful, because he cannot perform the logically impossible. But this criticism is just a mistake. Consider anything which is (presumably) logically impossible, such as making a round square. But a round square is nothing at all, actual or possible. So this isn't a (possible) something, which even God cannot make: it is nothing at all, actual or possible. So it may be there is nothing at all that God cannot make, or do – at least in theory.

Perhaps however the three epithets are incompatible with each other. For example, an all-Knowing God would *know*

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what is going to happen in the future, so presumably it is impossible for Him in the future to change it, however powerful He might be. If He does (later on) decide to change what was otherwise going to happen, then He cannot be all-Knowing. And if, as I think, it is logically impossible to change the past – for then something would both have happened and not have happened – then this is another 'nothing' that God 'cannot' do. This hasn't prevented some very intelligent religious philosophers from arguing that He can indeed change the past.

Presumably there might however be just one Entity which has the best possible combination of all three epithets, whatever this combination might be: if there is more than one such combination, then we are in trouble. We will presumably never know what the best combination might be, but at least such an Entity is going to be extremely Good, extremely Powerful, and extremely Knowledgeable. Now suppose we pray to such an Entity to make something good happen, which looks as though it otherwise will not happen: for example we pray to make an avalanche miss a village. There does not seem anything morally wrong with this: but I suggest that there is.

For according to someone who prays, what is such a God supposed to think? Presumably: 'I was going to let that avalanche kill all those people, but now that I have received this prayer, *I'll change my mind and make it miss*.' But this is extremely presumptuous, indeed impertinent on the part of the person who prays: surely God is supposed to know better than us what things are good.

My friend and ex-colleague Peter Cave has pointed out to me that if we pray *now* to God to save someone, then for it to be efficacious doesn't require God *now* to take the prayers into account and perhaps save the life of someone He wasn't going to save. For God, being all-knowing, would foresee that we were going to pray, and would take this into account earlier on in judging whether the potential victim should be saved. (When would God do this? At the beginning of time, if it had a beginning? And we hope His fore-

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knowledge isn't incompatible with our freedom of will: after all, even we humans can often predict what someone else will freely choose to do.)

But I believe this doesn't affect my point. God surely knows better than we do what a potential victim deserves: whenever in time He knows about our prayers, He still should and therefore presumably would not be swayed by them. He knows what we will do and can infallibly even 'look into our hearts', whereas we might be mistaken. There are even further problems.

I once knew an extremely good and pious Christian who was struck with incurable cancer at an early age. Allegedly he told his wife and young children to attempt not to be unhappy, but rather to rejoice, because he was going to be taken into the bosom of God at an earlier age than would have been expected. I don't know what their reaction was, but presumably he himself might have thought this was a just reward for his goodness – except that he wasn't so presumptuous. Perhaps the good die young.

Furthermore, some people pray for a particular person to survive, and others for him to die: presumably this happened in the case of Hitler. Consider also some mothers of suicide bombers, who pray for success and then rejoice that their son or daughter has died as well as killing lots of relatively innocent people either in India, the capitalist West, Israel, or perhaps who are Sunnis rather than Shias or *vice versa*. So we may indeed think that relatively innocent people in a village shouldn't be engulfed by an avalanche, but if there is an all-Good and all-Powerful God *who intervenes in the workings of the world* then we should accept that He knows better than us, and we should not pray for Him to intervene in an outcome simply because we think it good. Surely, Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven? But actually, it already is, if there is a God with the three epithets. If people who pray are unable to apprehend this truth, then we might think that they ought to be able to: but if it hurts nobody, then presumably they should be forgiven for this impertinent and immoral behaviour.

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The rain [it falleth on] the just
And also on the unjust fellas.
But mainly on the just because
The unjust steal the just's umbrellas[3]

We should carry out those acts which are morally the best ones available, no matter whether or not we get rewarded. Indeed, getting rewarded for them, for example by going to heaven, or even by allegedly 'flourishing' (not necessarily financially, perish the thought), thereby makes them morally suspect.

It would make perfect sense to pray to a certain sort of *evil* deity to change his mind, and show mercy. Such an entity might be open to persuasion. But as Stephen Law has pointed out to me in correspondence, if such a god were omnipotent, omniscient and omnimalevolent, then it would be pointless, for he would maximize evil whatever we pray for. Thus the arguments against praying to a good God have the same logical structure as arguments against praying to a bad one, and Law has neatly summarized my argument by writing to me 'You think it wrong and presumably pointless to pray to God to do X (if X is the best thing to do he will do it, if not, you are praying for less goodness, which is wrong)'. I think I must have had in mind an evil deity who might be persuaded by burnt offerings of doves or sheep, or perhaps the sacrifice of a few virgins.

There seems however as little evidence for such an evil entity who interferes with the workings of the world as there is for a good God who does likewise. Some of the religious, and not just so-called 'primitive' peoples, do believe in such an entity: apparently the Catholic church and even the Church of England carry out exorcisms, even if rarely, and the Catholic Church has an official who claims that only the existence of the devil can explain, for example, paedophilia in various Catholic priests. Some of us think there is a simpler explanation for such behaviour.

If there were any evidence for the existence of supernatural entities at work in the world, which there is not, then

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the most rational thing to think would be that there are (at least) two such entities of roughly equal power, in permanent conflict between good and evil. Apparently Zoroastrians believe there are. The relative rationality of this religious belief may be enough in itself to explain why there are so few Zoroastrians.

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Notes

[1] Saul Smilansky, 'A Moral Problem about Prayer', *Think*, No. 36, Vol. 13, Spring (2014),104 – 113

[2] My understanding of this point is due to an article by Renford Bambrough, I believe arguing against a view of Sartre about this case, I think (although I am not sure) in his article 'Unanswerable Questions' (of which there are none, even if we will never know the *correct* answers) in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 1966.

[3] Words in brackets slightly altered by me for scanning etc. Googling this gave me the information that the poem is in 'The Stonemason' by Cormac McCarthy, but I rather think it is by Hilaire Belloc, although I cannot find the original.

I am extremely grateful to Peter Cave for pointing out some errors in an original version of this piece, however painful this might have been. It doesn't follow that he agrees with everything that is left. My grateful thanks for clarifications are also due to Sophie Bolat and to Stephen Law.

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