



CHOOSING TO PRAY FOR THE PAST

T. J. Mawson

St Peter's College, University of Oxford

Correspondence email address: tim.mawson@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: Most of those who believe in the theistic God offer petitionary prayers to Him, supposing that, whatever else they may be doing when they are doing so, they are increasing the chances that reality will conform to their prayerfully expressed desires for it. On several clusters of views that are popular with theists, praying that the past *have been* a certain way seems to make no less sense than praying that the future *will be* a certain way, for God is atemporal and thus for Him the time at which a prayer happens to be uttered relative to the outcome it concerns seems likely to be an irrelevance. In this paper, I outline one reason why it is not an irrelevance and draw out the implication for whether or not one can coherently consider oneself to be *choosing* to utter efficacious prayers for the past.

KEYWORDS: Prayer; time; God

Introduction

Most of those who believe in the theistic God offer petitionary prayers to Him, supposing that, whatever else they may be doing when they are doing so, they are increasing the chances that reality will conform to their prayerfully expressed desires for it.¹ For example, if I were to receive a message to the effect that my wife had been

¹ The only author I am aware of as denying that this is *any* part of what people offering petitionary prayers are supposing of themselves that they are doing is D. Z. Phillips (Phillips, 1981, *passim*). Phillips offers no empirical support for his minority report, basing it instead on quite general considerations of a Wittgensteinian Fideist sort. Of course, that people offering petitionary prayers may also be doing things other than seeking to influence God to influence the world (affirming their values and membership of a community; building their devotional/spiritual lives; expressing love; accessing God's peace and in general reconciling themselves to God's will for the situation in mind, whatever that will may turn out to entail; and more) is not contested here; the claim in the main text is that this is *one* of the things they characteristically take themselves to be doing in offering petitionary prayers, not that it is the only thing they ever take themselves to be doing.

involved in a car accident and that she was being rushed to a particular hospital where in ten or so minutes' time she would be undergoing emergency surgery with the aim of saving her life, then, as I made my own hurried way to that hospital, I would pray to God that He be with her and with her surgeons in the operation ahead, helping them to help her. I might even pray for what I considered to be quite possibly needed for her to survive the operation, a miracle. Who amongst those who believe in God would not act similarly in similar circumstances? And a presumption amongst those so acting must be that petitionary prayers influence God to influence the world in the manner of the prayerfully expressed wish for it, i.e. that some prayers of this sort are efficacious in this sense.²

On a cluster of views concerning God's relationship to time and other matters, praying that the past *has been* a certain way seems to make no less sense than praying that the future *will be* a certain way. In each case, one is supposing that by doing so one is increasing the chances that reality will conform to one's prayerfully expressed desires for it. In fact, this is true on several distinct clusters of views, a matter which I shall return to in a moment. In the scenario imagined in the previous paragraph, if, as I travelled to the hospital, I were to get another message, this one to the effect that the surgery had now been completed and the outcome of it was now definitively known, but a message that was then cut-off prematurely at just that moment when that known outcome was about to be divulged to me, I would pray that the outcome of the now-completed surgery have been a success in what I would then be taking to be the past no less assiduously than I had been praying in the past that its outcome would be a success in what was then the future. The issue of *when* this desired outcome – my wife's surgery saving her life – happens to be in time relative to my act of praying for it doesn't seem to make any difference to my reasons for praying for it. And it is natural to suppose that neither does it make any difference to God's reasons for answering my prayer for it in the manner that I am asking Him to answer it. In this paper, after outlining the cluster of views which seems to me to make best sense of such past-directed prayers as we may call them³, I shall show how, on this combination of theses, this natural supposition is false.

² In the main text, when I say of some such prayers simply that they are efficacious, I mean efficacious in this sense – productive of the outcomes that are prayerfully asked for. If God hears my prayer, but allows my wife to die nonetheless, answering my prayer instead by comforting me on her death more than He would otherwise have done, my prayer produces an effect (His comforting me more than He would otherwise have done) but it is not efficacious in the sense used in the main text, as that was not the outcome I was asking for.

³ So, as I shall be using the term, past-directed prayers are petitionary prayers for outcomes that are in the past relative to the time they are prayed. There are other sorts of prayer that are in some sense directed to happenings in the past but which do not count as past-directed in the sense operative in this paper. For example, if I were to pray that I will be reconciled to some happening in the past the nature of which is unknown to me at the time of my praying, but which – I suppose – will subsequently be revealed to me, that is not a past-directed prayer in the sense operative here. In the main text of the paper, I do not discuss the fact that whether or not a prayer is past directed may be unknown to the person praying it. But I suggest that this fact explains to some extent why when a petitionary prayer is uttered relative to the outcome it directs itself towards seems to be an irrelevance to the reasons a person

Past-Directed Prayers in General

Even the most enthusiastic advocates of past-directed prayers offer words of caution, which it is well to note (and heed) before moving on. For example, surely all will acknowledge the wisdom of this:

There is a sense in which, like St. Paul, we need to be ‘forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead’ (Phil. 3:13). Spending too much time thinking about the past can lead us to neglect the attention we need to give to future concerns.” (Akin, 2018)

It’s hard not to think that, in at least some cases, time spent offering prayers for things in the past is going to be less productive - spiritually and in other respects - than time spent in other endeavours. Nevertheless, it is equally assuredly true that some do report themselves as finding certain past-directed prayers spiritually helpful and as deliberately making space for them in their regular prayer lives; it’s hard not to feel comforted by the thought that “it’s never too late to pray for someone” (Akin, 2018)⁴ All the same, some do speak against the spiritual prudence of praying for the past as such; according to them, all past-directed prayers are to be avoided.⁵ So, opinions are divided within the theistic community.

Amongst those who count at least some past-directed prayers as permissible, something of a consensus has emerged that praying for an outcome one knows *not* to have obtained is in all cases to be avoided. The rationale is simple: if one knows that God’s will for a certain situation is a certain way, it would be knowably useless at best and knowably contumacious at worst to pray to Him for something different from that to obtain. Accordingly, praying for an outcome one knows to have obtained, even if perhaps equally knowably useless, is not going to be expressive of contumacy. Praying for an outcome about which one knows nothing either way is permissible in principle as neither knowably useless nor contumacious. In practice, for opportunity-cost reasons if no others, it might not be advisable – see the words of caution given earlier. Even if there is this consensus on how knowledge of the prayed-for outcome affects

has to pray it. In a variant of the scenario imagined in the main text, if I had not got the second message, but had taken sufficient time in travelling to the hospital for it to become a matter of epistemic uncertainty for me whether or not the outcome for which I was praying was in the future, the present, or the past, I would not naturally take the diminishing chances of the prayer being for an event in the future to be correlated with a diminishing chance that I had reason to pray it.

⁴ Akin reports himself as making time for past-directed prayers in his prayer life and the comforting thought in quotation marks is a quotation from him

⁵ Marcel Sarot, in an unpublished paper presented to the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion, September 2nd, 2022, and in personal correspondence thereafter, asserts that past-directed prayers are incompatible with a properly ramified – Christian-theologically nuanced – theism. Similarly, Noam Oren informs me that in the Jewish tradition there is a general prohibition against prayers for events in the past.

the rationality of praying for it, there is not a universally held opinion on the matter amongst those who defend the rationality of some past-directed prayers.⁶

Be all this it may, as a matter of “pure philosophy”, *prima facie* there seems to be nothing incoherent in the practice of directing petitionary prayers at past outcomes. Of course, the *ultima facie* coherence of one’s doing so must depend on what views one adopts on a variety of relatively “big” metaphysical issues – e.g. God’s relation to time and the nature of free will. Views on such metaphysical issues naturally fall into clusters, with connections of mutual support of various sorts linking the views so clustered. I shall shortly sketch the cluster of views on these issues on which past-directed prayers seems to me to make the most sense, all things considered. This sees God as atemporal (‘outside time’, as it is often put) and freedom as libertarian. And I shall then draw out an implication of this cluster of views for one’s considering oneself freely choosing to offer such prayers, *viz.* that only unfreely offered past-directed petitionary prayers can be answered as the petitioners wish, i.e. be efficacious in the sense of the term used here.

I speak of the cluster of views on which the efficacy of past-directed prayers makes “most sense, all things considered”. My analysis is that certain combinations of views other than the one I focus on are in themselves coherent and consistent with past-directed prayer being efficacious; and some of these ignored combinations do not generate the issue that I go on to diagnose. Nevertheless, I suggest that these are clusters which we have *all-things-considered* reasons to reject, reasons which aren’t directly to do with past-directed prayer, but rather to do with the nature of the other crucial pieces of the metaphysical jigsaw puzzle, e.g. the nature of freedom. In narrowing my focus in this way, I shall most obviously be ignoring compatibilist accounts of human freedom; but I shall also be ignoring the view that God’s will being entirely sufficient to produce all that happens, including our own actions, does *not* entail that our apparent actions are not free in the libertarian sense.⁷ Thus, I point out before moving on that the argument of this paper, insofar as its conclusion is counterintuitive, may be taken to give one reason to endorse a disjunction of the ignored clusters of views on these wider metaphysical issues none of which entail this conclusion. See Timpe (2005) for an overview of the clusters of views on which the efficacy of past-directed prayers makes sense – as he calls them, “simple foreknowledge”, “eternalist”, and “Molinist” – and a cluster on which it does not make sense, “open theist”.

⁶ Early on, Lewis argued in the manner sketched for the consensus view (Lewis, 1959, pp. 214-215); and others have tended to endorse this reasoning. See, for example, discussion of the issue in Timpe, 2005, pp. 318-319. Further discussion of Lewis’s argument and a defence of the dissenting view is given in Mawson (2007). The author is disappointed that nobody has joined him in this dissenting view; he takes himself to know of his loneliness in this regard; and he offers prayers that he be mistaken about it. Mawson’s view is critically assessed in Davison, 2017, pp. 148-150.

⁷ See Grant (2019). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this journal for drawing my attention to this.

Past-Directed Prayers and Freedom

In a passage from his book *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, which is oft-quoted by friends of past-directed praying, C. S. Lewis sums up this cluster of theses very well. His doing so no doubt explains why it is oft quoted by friends of praying for the past; and it explains why I shall quote it again:

When we are praying about the result of, say, a battle...the thought will often cross our minds that...the event is already decided one way or the other. I believe this to be no good reason for ceasing our prayers. The event certainly has been decided...But one of the things taken into account in deciding it, and therefore one of the things that really cause it to happen, may be this very prayer that we are now offering. Thus, shocking as it may sound, I conclude that we can at noon become part causes of an event occurring at ten o'clock. One may ask, 'Then if I stop praying can God go back and alter what has already happened?' No. The event has already happened and one of its causes has been the fact that you are asking such questions instead of praying. One may ask, 'Then if I begin to pray can God go back and alter what has already happened?' No. The event has already happened and one of its causes is your present prayer. Thus, something really does depend on my choice. My free act contributes to the cosmic shape. This contribution is made in eternity or 'before all worlds'. (Lewis, 1959, p. 214)⁸

In the penultimate sentence quoted, Lewis talks of a *free* action (of prayer) and some assumptions as to the nature of freedom are definitely in the background for those who believe in the efficacy of at least some past-directed prayer. Lewis was a Libertarian about freedom, and so am I. Thus, for reasons which must remain off-stage in this paper, I judge that the cluster of views on the "big" metaphysical issues on which past-directed prayers make most sense all things considered supposes a libertarian account of free will. Supposing Libertarianism then requires of one that one suppose divine atemporalism (for quite general reasons to do with solving the foreknowledge and freedom puzzle), if it is not to fall into open theism. It thus results in the following overall picture of how past-directed prayers may be efficacious.

God is atemporal, outside time as it is sometimes put, and omniscient. Thus, He can and atemporally does bear in mind what prayers are uttered at time t as He atemporally decides what to permit or make happen at time $t-1$ no less than He can and atemporally does bear it in mind as He atemporally decides what to permit or make happen at time $t+1$. God is all-powerful. Thus He can and atemporally does set up the initial and boundary conditions of the universe and its laws of nature so as to produce without need for His miraculous intervention whatever effects He atemporally wills (either perfectly or permissively) to come about without need for

⁸ Lewis's view was defended, very capably, against some early attacks on it by Geoffrey Brown (1985).

His miraculous intervention. And God can and atemporally does interrupt these processes by miraculous intervention as He sees fit to bring about such events as He atemporally wills (perfectly) be brought about by such interruptions. God's character and the relationship which He wishes to have with us are such that in some cases He atemporally does what we ask of Him, bringing about effects in our spatio-temporal world in part because we ask for these effects.⁹ That is, He responds to our prayers – not mindlessly and automatically, of course, but giving our requests at least some weight in His atemporal making of His decisions, the effects of His relevant decisions being things which as a consequence happen in our spatio-temporal lives (even if we do not always see them as the effects of His decisions).¹⁰ He gives our prayerfully expressed wishes some weight and He gives them some weight even in cases where they are for events which happen to occur at times prior to the times at which the prayers for them are uttered. This last view is a crucial component of the cluster as it is of any cluster on which past-directed prayers may be efficacious. It can be easily skipped over and it is in fact central to the main claim of this paper. So, I flag it up for particular attention now. The cluster would not be in itself incoherent, but it *would* preclude the efficacy of past-directed prayers, were one to add instead the claim that God takes when in time relative to the events it concerns a petitionary prayer is uttered as in itself crucial in determining if He gives it any non-zero weighting in His decision-making and that He gives zero weighting if any element of the prayer concerns the past or to those elements of the prayer which do concern the past.¹¹ For a cluster to be coherent and yet allow for the efficacy of some past-directed prayers, it is not required that it subscribes to God a disposition to give past-directed prayers *no* less weight in virtue of their being past-directed (or their past-directed elements no less weight because of it), just to God's not giving them (or their elements) zero weight in virtue

⁹ I am here deliberately choosing to speak of God's "bringing about" the past, and not of His 'changing' the past, but Noam Oren points out to me that there is another fork in the road at this point, and one could go in the direction the coherence of which has recently been argued for by Sam Lebens and Tyrone Goldschmidt (2017).

¹⁰ The cluster of views I have in mind then rejects the principle which Zagzebski labels the Principle of "The Necessity of Eternity". (See Zagzebski (1991), discussion pp. 61-63, term first used p. 62; see also esp. pp. 169-172; she also discusses it in her 2022.) The Necessity of Eternity principle seems to me, in a way it does not to her, one for which there is no support at all. To me it seems clear that if we believe in the atemporal God, we should think of our temporal choice to do something affecting what atemporal beliefs God has about what it is we temporally do. He believes, for example, that on a particular occasion I freely choose to raise my right arm, rather than my left, to illustrate a point about free will because it is in temporal fact my right arm, rather than my left, that I do freely raise on that occasion. Were – *per impossibile* – God's atemporal beliefs about temporal events *not* fixed by the temporal facts in this way, it is difficult to see how they could *be factive*, how they could be knowledge, at all. Of course, some classical theists hold that God stands in no real relations to creation at all. They will object at this point. But then again, they will have their own problems accounting for petitionary prayers as potentially efficacious, and, I take it, significant ones. Putting such views to one side then, if we add-in a Libertarian presupposition, that my freely choosing to raise my right arm on that occasion is something about which I could have done otherwise, namely raise my left (or presumably raise neither), I thus have this power over God's beliefs in atemporal eternity.

¹¹ I add this last clause to cater for temporally-mixed prayers such as "Please make it be the case that my friend, Joe, who is – as you know, Oh Lord – now half way through a two-day selection conference for ordination, have found it, be finding it, and continue over the next day to find it, useful".

of that. However, *prima facie* it seems that God would not have any reason to give past-directed prayers any less weight at all. In this paper, after having laid out the general view in a bit more detail, I shall argue that on it, we can see, *secunda facie*, that He does have a reason to give them less – but not in all cases zero – weight.

God's giving our petitionary prayers non-zero weight in this sense could be described as His having a preference in His creation for universes with greater harmony between what comes to pass in them and the prayerfully expressed wishes of His creatures over universes with a lesser degree of such harmony. Of course, this harmony is not His only preference, one may presume, for otherwise there would be perfect harmony and perfect harmony there manifestly is not. But the view that God does answer some prayers in the manners the people asking them wish them to be answered because they asked for them to be answered that way is the view we're considering. That view commits its proponents to thinking that God does have this preference (even if only amongst others) when He selects a universe for creation and when He miraculously intervenes.

So, we may ask, why on this model might God give a lesser weighting to past-directed prayers *per se* than He does to future-directed ones, why might His preference for this sort of harmony be greater when it is between prayerfully expressed wishes and outcomes that are in the future relative to the moment of their prayerful expression than it is for this sort of harmony between prayerfully expressed wishes and outcomes that are in the past relative to the moment of their prayerful expression? Cogent in this context is God's preference for preserving the libertarian freedom of His creatures over morally significant matters, which matters, I take it, include choices affecting those creatures' prayers.

In response to the question raised at the end of the previous paragraph, I wish then to explore favourably the thought that there is a generic difference between past-directed prayers and future-directed ones in virtue of which God gives a lesser weight to past-directed ones as such than He gives to future-directed ones as such. This difference, I shall suggest, is that past-directed prayers are, in effect if not in intention, prayers for a reduction in the libertarian freedom of the person praying them.¹²

First, it must be acknowledged that some efficacious *future*-directed prayers may involve a reduction in libertarian freedom too, so I am not claiming this is a problem unique to past-directed prayers. For example, in the scenario imagined earlier, if I am praying for God to help the surgeons who will be operating on my wife at a time that is in the future relative to my act of praying for it, God may find that He has overall most reason to answer my prayer by reducing a particular surgeon's freedom over how to conduct the surgery - literally forcing his hand at some crucial moment, say.

¹² In the main text, I "explore favourably", as I put it, the thought by arguing for it, although, in a spirit of full disclosure, I report in this note the fact that I am not myself as convinced by my argument as I may appear to be in the main text. I have a nagging feeling that something has gone wrong with it. Still, in order to get the view out onto the table as clearly as possible, I think it best to push those concerns out of view in the main text. Many of those who have kindly commented on drafts of this paper have also remained unconvinced, which further undermines my confidence.

Let us call such actions on God's part "freedom-blocking interventions". Van Inwagen at one stage (2008, p. 219) calls the effects of (at least some?) such interventions "freedom-denying prophetic objects" and I shall use that term too.¹³ Whilst some answers to future-directed prayers will be freedom-blocking, there seems to be nothing *necessarily* freedom-blocking about what God must do to render future-directed prayers efficacious in all cases. For example, in the scenario imagined where I am praying in advance for the success of my wife's surgery, God may ensure the effect I pray for whilst fully respecting the libertarian freedoms of all the surgeons involved simply by causing some miraculous improvement in my wife's condition after they have done their work. I wish to suggest that, by contrast, there is a systematic conflict between efficaciously praying for the past and the libertarian freedom of the person uttering the prayers, one which thus gives God a systematic reason to weigh past-directed prayers *per se* less than future-directed ones *per se*. He has less of a preference for a harmony between past-directed prayers and the outcomes at which they are directed and future-directed prayers and the outcomes at which they are directed, in virtue of His general preference for preserving the libertarian freedom of His creatures over what to pray, which second preference is always in tension with His preference for this sort of harmony in the case of past-directed prayers.

This possibility of a freedom-blocking intervention on God's part and van Inwagen's talk of freedom-denying prophetic objects brings back to mind the dilemma of foreknowledge and freedom, for the issue of this paper is in a (loose) sense a localised version of that issue. The original, global, problem of foreknowledge and freedom was generated by the thought that were God to know (a) infallibly and (b) in advance what it is that we shall do in the future, then none of us could have freedom over what we do in the future. This would follow for none of us could then have the power to do otherwise than whatever it is God now infallibly believes that we'll do and the principle that alternative possibilities must be open to agents at the moment of their choices if their choices are to be free is one to which the libertarian is committed. Libertarian freedom requires that the agent be able to do otherwise than whatever it is they actually do, everything else in the universe prior to their choice remaining the same. Consequently, a significant motivating factor for some who conceive of God's eternity as atemporal is that it seems to offer a quick solution to this global puzzle. If God is atemporal, then He does not know anything in advance at

¹³ Van Inwagen's discussion of his own example – a rock engraved with a sentence expressing in English a proposition about a time that is (at the moment the rock appears) the future – is worth reading, but so is Zagzebski's critique of it (in her 2022, pp. 40-50). In the main text, I tend to talk about freedom-blocking interventions, rather than freedom-denying prophetic objects, as the sort of intervention which is in scope in this paper is one to produce an effect earlier in time in response to a prayer for it at a later time, which – due to the infallibility of omnipotence – blocks the later "choice" to utter that prayer from being genuinely free. There need be no object in anything but the thinnest of senses produced as a result of this intervention and nor need the result be in any natural sense prophetic. For example, the result may simply be that a cancer not develop in a particular cell in a way that it would have developed had the prayer not been uttered. It is unlikely van Inwagen would call the continuingly-benign cell a "freedom-denying prophetic object", though he never closely defines the term.

all, so the crucial premise of the argument for the incompatibility of omniscience and libertarian freedom, which I have labelled (b), is simply false. But this general solution, which I accept as such, leaves open the possibility of particular freedom-blocking interventions on God's part. If God atemporally determines that He would rather guarantee some effect than preserve the freedoms He would need to block in order to guarantee it, then of course He may do so. One way in which He might intervene in a freedom-blocking way is by placing into the mind of a temporal agent an infallible belief about what is to that agent at the time of their belief the future where that belief concerns an action or actions as yet to be performed; from then on, that action or those actions cannot be free. However, I suggest that another way is His intervening without directly affecting the beliefs of anyone.

For Christians, an interesting example of a possible freedom-blocking intervention on God's part comes in the form of the incarnation, Jesus then being the possible freedom-denying prophetic object in van Inwagen's terms. If we suppose that Jesus is indeed God and was consciously omniscient in "His days of the flesh", as they are sometimes called, we are supposing God to have intervened in a freedom-blocking way that is local in the sense that it only applies to all apparent choices *after* Jesus's arrival (those who lived and died before Him cannot be affected), but global in the sense that it applies to *all* apparent choices thereafter. However, it seems to me that this putative example of a freedom-blocking intervention and consequent freedom-denying prophetic object can be defused relatively easily by simply denying that Jesus was omniscient in His days of the flesh at least in the sense of having occurrent knowledge. During that time, He *could* have called to mind all true propositions concerning actions that were to Him future, but He did *not* actually do so. Had He actually done so, then the freedom of all thereafter would have been voided. But, as He actually did not do so, thus the freedom of those thereafter was preserved.¹⁴

Zagzebski reports of her own view as follows:

I suspect that the problem exists as long as it is even possible that God enter time with infallible foreknowledge, and this point can be generalized. Van Inwagen makes it clear [in his example of a freedom-denying prophetic object - a stone engraved with a sentence about what is, at the time of its appearing, the future] that he is not worried that God's inscription on the monument would prevent human freedom only if God actually created such a monument. Presumably, he thinks that there is no such monument, but he thinks the mere possibility of the monument threatens fatalism. And this is the usual position of incompatibilists about infallible foreknowledge and free will. If I'm right about that, we cannot save the timelessness solution as a way out

¹⁴ This general solution is compatible with allowing that Jesus may have brought forward some pieces of knowledge of what was at the time He held them the future, in which case the freedom of some would have been locally curtailed thereafter insofar as they pertained to those facts in relevant ways.

of fatalism unless it turns out that it is not even possible that a timeless God enter time with infallible foreknowledge, nor can he reveal his foreknowledge to an infallible temporal being. (Zagzebski, 2022, 43)

But Zagzebski is not right about that. The possibility of God's giving a particular person infallible knowledge that a certain person will do something at a time that is in the future relative to the person's gaining the infallible knowledge of it does not as such preclude any libertarian freedom at all; God has to *actualise* that possibility to preclude what freedom His doing so precludes. However, one significant difference between God's intentions and (at least most of) ours is that they cannot be thwarted (just as one significant difference between His knowledge and (at least most of) ours is that He cannot be mistaken. And this, I suggest, generates a parallel freedom-blocking aspect to His efficaciously answering prayers for the past, which is akin to His inserting freedom-denying prophetic objects, in van Inwagen's sense, but does not need to involve granting anyone infallible beliefs.

If God atemporally knows that at $t+1$ a particular person, P, prays for a particular outcome, O, to have occurred at an earlier time, t , then He may (presuming it is in accordance with His perfect wisdom of course), choose to give to the desirability of O's happening at t from P's point of view at $t+1$ sufficient weight so as to decide to bring about O at t when He would not otherwise have done so. His doing this is what must happen if P's prayer is to be efficacious in the sense defined; it has to be because P prayed for it that O occurred. In such a case then, God may atemporally form the intention to answer P's prayer either by intervening to produce directly the effect of O at t or by intervening at $t-1$ so as to set in train a causal process leading indirectly to O at t . In either eventuality, it cannot then at any time later than the effect of His intervention be possible for anyone to make it the case that God's intention to answer P's prayer at $t+1$ with that intervention is derailed, which must mean that it cannot be in P's power to derail it. If that is so, P cannot then at $t+1$ *not* pray for outcome O at t ; P cannot make the description under which God atemporally wills His intervention, *viz.*, as I would express it, "to answer efficaciously P's prayer for O" a false description. Thus, God's answering a past-directed prayer in the manner that the person uttering it wishes Him to answer it - God's making the prayer efficacious in the sense I am using the term - is His intrinsically making a freedom-blocking intervention, the freedom which must be blocked being that of the person uttering the prayer to which the intervention is an efficacious answer. At the moment of apparent choice, it is not true that the agent can do something other than what they actually do everything else in the universe prior to that moment remaining the same. Only unfreely uttered past-directed prayers can be answered as those who pray them would wish, *viz.* by their forming in God the atemporal intention to produce an effect in response to their prayers earlier in time than the moment of their prayers which will be itself or bring about the outcome for which they pray.

Given that God has a general preference for worlds in which libertarian freedom over which prayers to utter is not curtailed, the conflict between efficacious past-directed prayers and the freedoms of those uttering them means that God is atemporally going to take into account when a prayer is uttered (relative to the outcome it is directed towards) and give less weight to past-directed prayers than He does to future-directed ones simply in virtue of their being so. Of course, we know that God does not regard reducing freedom as in all cases a prohibitive a cost to bear. After all, if we are traditional theists, we believe He did give some prophets infallible knowledge of the future, curtailing relevant choices thereafter. But God must give past-directed prayers at least *some* lesser weight as such because of the tension between their efficacy and the freedom of the people praying them. So, it seems we should conclude that God may, all things considered, still in some cases grant the prayerfully expressed wishes of those who utter past-directed prayers because they utter them, merely regretting the unfreedom His granting these prayers makes for in those uttering them (as well perhaps as others). In such cases, one might say that though God brings about a given outcome because of the prayer for it, the “economy of action is all internal to God” (a phrase I owe to Martin Pickup) and that seems to undercut at least some of the reasons God has for answering such prayers, *viz.* those pertaining to building relationships of the most desirable sort with his creatures. But it does not clearly preclude Him from deciding that, all things being considered, He will answer some past-directed prayers efficaciously nonetheless.

One may apply this result to one’s own experience.

Putting This Claim to the Test

There are many grounds on which one might be a libertarian. One of them, I suggest, is the phenomenology of everyday choice-making.¹⁵ As one deliberates between two options - let’s say, having a cup of tea or having a cup of coffee - these two options do each strike one as physically possible for one; it seems that nothing prevents one reaching for the tea and nothing prevents one reaching for the coffee. Of course, there are arguments which seek to undermine the evidential force of all such seemings. But all agree that it is the way things seem. It is built into what it is to consider oneself to be deliberating between options that one takes it to be between options more than one of which is causally available to one. And so, if one decides that Libertarianism is to be endorsed, one will naturally take such seemings as evidence of the alternative possibilities being open to one when they are felt. One should concede that this is fallible evidence. All will be aware of stage magicians “forcing” cards and so on. Everyone should agree that one can have such a seeming of alternative possibilities and yet alternative possibilities be in fact absent. But still, if it seems to one that one

¹⁵ My own book-length articulation of what seem to me the best reasons for being a libertarian and analysis of this as a reason is given in my 2011.

could either pray a particular past-directed prayer or not, one will rightly take that seeming as some evidence that the prayer – should one utter it – will be a prayer that one will freely utter and, as such, will be a prayer that is not atemporally destined to be answered as one would wish (for it would have to be unfreely prayed were it to be efficacious in this sense). One might take this as some reason not to pray it, for one might take it that one has some evidence that it would not be efficacious if one did. If, conversely, one seems to oneself compelled to utter a particular past-directed prayer, that is some – fallible – evidence that one is not free over whether or not to utter it, and that unfreedom *may* in turn be due to the fact that it is atemporally destined to be answered as one would wish. One might find this reflection motivates one all the more to pray it. But even if only unfree past-directed prayers can be answered as the people praying them would wish, not all unfree past-directed prayers are answered as the people uttering them would wish; and just as a seeming that more than one option is open to one may be illusory, so a seeming that *not* more than one is open may also be illusory. Still, to the extent that one can rule out other explanations of one's apparent compulsion, one's sense of unfreedom over the uttering of a particular past-directed prayer may be taken to be some grounds for modest optimism about the relevant bit of the past.

Concluding Thought

A day or so after I had heard the paper by Marcel Sarot to the effect that all past-directed prayers are spiritually harmful, which I referenced in an earlier note, I was at home – it was the weekend – when I received an email from the Master of my College. My rooms in College are on the ground floor of a Georgian building, the top two floors of which are the Master's Lodgings.¹⁶ Water had, so I was told, flooded into both floors of the Master's lodgings immediately above my rooms on the ground floor; it had caused significant damage; and the Master felt she should inform me as I might wish to come in to see what the state of my own rooms was. I did indeed want to come in – as well as my books, I keep various family portraits and other things of great sentimental value in my rooms in College; none of them would have done better for a soaking. It takes me about half an hour to walk in from home and, as I did so, I was naturally worried about what I would find on my arrival. I care rather more than I should about my material possessions. It is reported that when Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was told that all his possessions had been irrecoverably lost in a shipwreck, he said simply, "Fortune bids me to be a less encumbered philosopher." I am sorry to say that my reaction to significant damage to my possessions would be considerably less stoical. By now, the sun was shining and there was no doubt that any flood would be entirely in the past; the damage, if there had been any, would have been done. All

¹⁶ For a description of the building, see "Canal House" in Sherwood & Pevsner (1974 [1996]), p. 249, lines 22-29).

that was in the future was for me to find out, one way or the other, and then to react, one way or the other. As I walked in, I had time to reflect as to whether or not I should offer a past-directed prayer that no damage have been done. Should I instead pray simply that I be reconciled to God's will for my possessions, whatever that might be? I couldn't help but think that it would be more spiritually mature of me to do so. But all this reflection didn't manage to get to a stage which I could describe as deliberation between these as alternatives, for I found myself apparently compelled to pray simply that my room have not been flooded, that there not have been any damage at all; I just couldn't seem to help myself. And when I got to my rooms? I found them completely dry. And seemed to myself equally compelled to thank God for that.¹⁷

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