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A collaborative model of petitionary prayer

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Abstract: **Petitionary prayer appears pointless in light of divine attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Several philosophers have attempted to reinstate the significance of petitionary prayer by drawing attention to its indirect benefits. The article analyses the shortcomings in this strategy and defends a different solution to the difficulty. Conceiving of God as motivated by the desire to form a loving partnership with human beings allows one to formulate a collaborative account of petitionary prayer. On this model, God freely chooses to accede to some human requests in order to incorporate human desires and projects into His plan for the world.**

Is petitionary prayer pointless?

According to Davison (2009), given a person *P* and an event *E*, to say that God answered *P*'s prayer for *E* is to say that the following four conditions were satisfied:

(1) *P* prayed to God for *E*.
(2) *E* happened.
(3) *E* is good.
(4) God brought about *E* and did so at least in part because *P* prayed for *E*.[1]

Davison argued that this understanding of petitionary prayer improves upon other accounts that may initially suggest themselves. For example, while (1) and (2) may at first appear sufficient for analysing 'God answered *P*'s prayer for *E*', (3) must be added because God's moral perfection demands that He should not answer a prayer for *E* if *E* is bad. No bad event that happens after a person has prayed for it could possibly be God's answer to the person's prayers.[2] The

lottery winner's demise after his heirs pray that he should succumb to a heart attack must simply be a coincidence. But the addition of (3) to (1) and (2) is not enough because, even if *E* is good, its occurrence after P prayed for it may *still* be a coincidence. A thunderstorm following a long drought need not be God's answer to the farmer's prayers. It may simply be an atmospheric phenomenon that would have happened anyway. Moreover, the occurrence of a positive event may be no more than coincidentally related to petitionary prayer even if it was in fact God who brought about the event. For quite independently of anyone's prayers, God may have had His own reasons for wanting the event to happen.[3] So, adding (4) is an essential step. It is only the set consisting of (1)–(4) that expresses what it means to say that *P*'s prayer was answered. In addition to *E* occurring and being good, and in addition to *P* praying for *E*, it must also be the case that it was God who brought about *E* and did so for the reason that *P* prayed for *E* (or for a set of reasons that included the fact that *P* prayed for *E*). An answered prayer is one that was *efficacious*, namely, one that influenced God's decision to bring about the event the petitioner prayed for.

While we now have a satisfactory analysis of 'God answered *P*'s prayer for *E*', the introduction of (4) also raises some challenging questions. Davison (2009) explained that it is hard to formulate a persuasive reasons-based account of petitionary prayer. For God is thought of as rational and free. Independently of any human prayers, He has reasons for bringing about things that are good. One cannot make God do anything,[4] and whenever something good is at stake, God already has reasons for bringing it about. If the fact that someone prayed for a particular outcome is added to God's reasons, to what extent and under what circumstances can it truly be said that God's bringing about the outcome was an answer to that person's prayers? In other words, 'How central a role must [the fact that I prayed for something] play in God's reasons for bringing about the thing in question in order for God's bringing it about to count as an answer to my prayer?'[5]

It is important to note that what is at stake here is not just seeing more clearly into the structure of God's decisions. What looms is something far more threatening: a complete loss of significance for petitionary prayer. God's perfect understanding of the world gives Him an equally perfect understanding of the reasons that militate in favour of bringing about certain good outcomes. God can evaluate the place of every event – actual and possible – in the overall development of His plan for the universe. He can situate any event in the immensely complex network of relationships it bears to all other events. But then petitionary prayer by human beings appears unlikely to play any role in the structure of God's reasons for supporting the occurrence of certain events. The significance of human prayer will pale in comparison to the more prominent reasons God already has. Say that a person prays for the coming of the Kingdom of God. What could such a prayer add to the much weightier reasons why God is already providentially shaping the course of the universe towards the realization of His Kingdom?[6] Likewise, if I pray for the recovery of a sick child, the significance of my prayer will appear

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negligible in comparison to God's infinite love for the child and His consequent reasons for wanting her to be healthy. Putting the point somewhat informally, one may say that asking God for something good – *anything* good – is as big a case of preaching to the choir as one can possibly imagine. In this light, petitionary prayer appears pointless. A person praying that God should grant something good seems to be like a seaman blowing on the sail as an irresistible wind is already propelling the ship towards its destination.

The divine attributes of omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence provide another vantage point from which one can conclude that petitionary prayer must be pointless. Basinger (1983)[7] explained that it seems to make little sense to petition an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent being. Such a being is already perfectly aware of his creatures' needs, perfectly motivated to do what is good for them, and perfectly capable of accomplishing the task. Owing to her father's lack of omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence, a child may need to bring a problem to her father's attention, ask if he would be willing to help her out, and enquire whether he can. None of these features of a human-to-human petition comes into play when the other party to the relationship is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent. 'But if the normal reasons humans petition one another are not applicable to the human/divine petitionary model, why then ought believers to engage in such a practice?' (Basinger (1983), 26).

Theists thus find themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, petitionary prayer is a widespread religious practice, one that accords with the deeply felt belief that a loving God does not simply arrange for a general, impersonal providence but actively *listens* for distress calls from the human world and intervenes with remedies, assistance, and comfort. In Christianity, for example, a petition for the continued satisfaction of basic needs (the 'daily bread') is included in the Lord's Prayer, together with requests for wider-scope events like the advent of the Kingdom of God. In times of need or when they are in fear for their lives or those of their loved ones, believers invoke God's assistance and protection. Indeed, who else would they turn to when all appears to be lost? On the other hand, as we have seen, reason appears to show the utter pointlessness of petitionary prayer. Those theists who are unwilling to abandon the practice of petitionary prayer – and I suspect that they are the majority – need a defence of its significance and value.

The purpose of this article is to discuss some recent strategies for providing such a defence. After highlighting some defects in these strategies, I will introduce what I think is a more effective theistic model for situating petitionary prayer in the context of the relationship between human beings and God. I believe that a theist adopting the model I propose will be able to form a clearer conception of petitionary prayer, one that dispels the impression of pointlessness and fully accords with the belief that God encourages human petitions and responds to them.

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Attempts at a solution

In the recent philosophical literature, the most common strategy for addressing the apparent pointlessness of petitionary prayer has been to emphasize the goods that come to human beings from having to petition God for some of the things they desire.[8] On this model, God decides that provision will sometimes require petition. In other words, He intentionally withholds certain things until people pray for them. He does so because He wants to give His human creatures access to certain special goods they would otherwise not enjoy or because He wants to shield them from the evils that may ensue from the ontological disproportion between humanity and its creator.

For example, Stump (1979) argued that petitionary prayer plays a much-needed intermediary role between human beings and God. The relationship between a perfect being and His finite and fallible creatures could easily degenerate into spoiling (if, of His own initiative, God systematically met all human needs and desires) or into the overwhelming of human beings (if God systematically violated His creatures' boundaries and gave His assistance independently of being asked). Like a good father, Stump suggests, God refrains from spoiling His children. He waits for them to petition for certain goods and then satisfies their requests on a selective basis. Like a good teacher, God does not overwhelm human beings with unsolicited interventions. A struggling student who was actively pursued by his professor with phone calls and other offers of help may justifiably feel that the professor is crossing some of the boundaries that protect autonomy. As a good professor respects her students' self-determination and waits for them to ask for help before providing her assistance, so God, Stump argued, refrains from overwhelming human beings by coming to their aid even when He is not petitioned. Instead, God makes petition a prerequisite for provision in order to preserve the healthy boundaries that must be present in any genuine friendship. In a nutshell, Stump's view is that petitionary prayer 'acts as a kind of buffer between man and God' (Stump (1979), 90).

Philosophers defending the significance of petitionary prayer along lines similar to Stump's have emphasized a number of other goods human beings come to enjoy through having to ask for certain things before they are given to them. For example, Murray and Meyers (1994)[9] argued that the dependence of provision upon petition discourages idolatry and fosters in human beings a genuine appreciation for all that they receive from God. When food becomes scarce and one is driven to pray to God for food, one is reminded that food is not simply a packaged commodity ready to be bought at the grocery store but is a basic good that has its source in nature and thus ultimately in God Himself. This realization acts as a defence against developing an idolatrous reliance on the human-made economic and technological processes that sustain food production and distribution.[10] Having to ask for some of the things they need (and having to accept that their prayers are not always answered) also contributes to the spiritual development

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of human beings by helping them feel sincerely grateful to God on those occasions when they do receive what they asked for.[11]

According to Murray and Meyers (1994), in addition to the spiritual goods brought about by the dependence of provision on petition, there is also what one may term an epistemic good. God's response to human requests serves as a litmus test through which believers can come to know His will:

> The believer is not merely enjoined to pray for perceived needs, but to do so with the sort of humility that permits her to say 'Thy will be done'. If the request is granted, she not only has a need fulfilled, she has continued the process of learning what sorts of things are in accordance with God's will. Likewise, if the believer prays and her request is not granted, she learns that her desires are not in accordance with God's will. (Murray & Meyers (1994), 319)

On this interpretation of petitionary prayer, when human beings have to ask for certain things before they are given to them, God teaches important lessons by means of His decisions, just as a father can make his moral principles known through the way in which he handles his children's requests.[12]

So far, I have summarized accounts of petitionary prayer that focus on spiritual and epistemic goods that are said to become available to the petitioner when she asks for something on her own behalf. However, it is important to note that petitionary prayer can also involve requests made *on behalf of other people*. According to some interpreters, an additional set of goods becomes available as a consequence of the fact that God makes certain provisions dependent on other-directed petitionary prayer (prayer for other people) or corporate petitionary prayer (prayer where multiple people coordinate their efforts and ask God to bestow a certain grace on an individual or a community).

For example, Masek (2001) argued that when someone prays for other people, a sequence of positive events of both practical and moral significance may be set in motion. As a person, say, prays for the victims of a natural disaster, the act itself of praying focuses the petitioner's thoughts on the victims' plight and may lead to concrete actions, such as donating to disaster-relief charities.[13] The petitioner's friends, in turn, may follow her example and contribute their own prayers and donations. This will result both in stronger relief efforts for the disaster victims and in moral elevation for the petitioner's friends. Masek sees petitionary prayer as a means through which human beings can form an especially meaningful connection and cause goodness in each other.

The sense of community petitionary prayer fosters is also at the centre of Murray's interpretation of corporate petitionary prayer. Murray (2004) argued that, by granting certain things only after multiple believers coordinated their petitionary efforts, God helps His followers attain an important good: the awareness of their interdependence and of the spiritual significance of community. In a Christian context, for example, the Church is seen as a body where the mutual assistance of the parts is essential for the good functioning of the whole organism. As Murray puts it, the Church members' unity 'is a good significant enough for

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God to make many of his provisions to individuals contingent upon their securing the other-directed prayers of different members of the Church' (Murray (2004), 251).[14]

Some difficulties

The philosophers whose work I have summarized so far attempt to defend petitionary prayer against the charge of pointlessness by emphasizing that those who pray to God for certain goods gain access to a special set of additional goods. These are the spiritual and epistemic goods believers come to enjoy when they satisfy the divine requirement that they should pray for what they want. On this understanding of petitionary prayer, the omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent God knows exactly what goods His human creatures desire. However, He refuses simply to provide these goods of His own accord. Instead, in some situations, He requires that human beings should petition Him for what they want. He does so in order that they receive other important goods: protection against spoiling or overwhelming, preservation from idolatry, sincere gratitude, knowledge of His will, stronger motivation to help those in need, a deeper sense of unity and interdependence among believers, etc. Henceforth, I will refer to such goods as the 'indirect benefits' of petitionary prayer.

The indirect benefits account of petitionary prayer sounds promising, but I believe that it does not ultimately stand up to scrutiny. If the goal is to establish that petitionary prayer has a point after all, the indirect benefits account does not fully accomplish its objective. To begin to see why this is the case, it is worth noting that the indirect benefits of petitionary prayer are disconnected from its efficacy. One can enjoy the indirect benefits even if petitionary prayer is in fact pointless. This fact stands out most clearly in the case of the indirect benefit consisting in the strengthening of the petitioner's resolve to help those in need. As we have seen, Masek (2001) argued that praying for the victims of a natural disaster establishes the significance of petitionary prayer because it brings about some goods that would not have manifested themselves without prayer. These are an increase in the petitioner's motivation to help, a corresponding increase in her friends' motivation, and all the positive consequences of these psychological changes that eventually make their way to the disaster victims in the form of concrete help.

Now, Masek is right that, in the type of case he has in mind, several beneficial consequences may not have come about had the petitioner not prayed for those in distress. But this is perfectly compatible with God never answering any human prayers. Even if petitionary prayer is pointless, the mere belief that God may listen to human calls for help has the potential of inducing the positive changes Masek describes. Petitionary prayer can be a bit like a self-fulfilling prophecy.[15] A person believing that God will listen to her prayers may feel closer to those she is praying for and may thus become more motivated to help them. Her attitude

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and actions may have a positive effect on her friends, and so on. But this cascade of beneficial consequences does not require any divine intervention. The benefits of prayer may come about even if God does not pay any attention to human petitions.

Hoffman (1985) made a similar point with regard to Stump's suggestion that God institutes petitionary prayer as a buffer designed to protect the possibility of genuine friendship with human beings:

> [A]ny role that efficacious petitionary prayer might have in inducing friendship between man and God could, given our epistemic situation, be equally well performed by the appearance of efficacy. Stump herself admits that we can't really know whether or not a prayer has been answered even if what we prayed for has come about. So we really don't know that prayer is efficacious, and as long as we believe that it is, we have the same inducement to friendship whether or not that belief is correct. (Hoffman (1985), 28)

In other words, as long as it seems to human beings that they are not spoiled or overwhelmed by God, then they are not spoiled or overwhelmed by Him. And a world where God does not answer any prayers is one where human beings do not feel spoiled or overwhelmed by Him. So, the healthy boundaries that are required for genuine friendship between human beings and God would be preserved even in the complete absence of any divine response to human petitionary prayer.

One could make similar arguments regarding the other indirect benefits of petitionary prayer. Even if she were mistaken, a person believing that God answers human prayers may steer clear of idolatry and experience sincere gratitude towards God when she interprets a positive event as divine intervention in response to her prayers. Likewise, a feeling of interdependence and closeness with other members of the religious community may arise in a believer engaging in other-directed or corporate prayer even if such forms of prayer are utterly inefficacious.

These considerations weaken the indirect benefits account of petitionary prayer. As we have seen, the conjunction of God's omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence strongly suggests that human petitions are inefficacious, and thus that petitionary prayer has no point. Can one seriously attempt to show that petitionary prayer still has a point by having its significance rest on the fruition of indirect benefits that petitioners enjoy even if their prayers have no point? This sounds a bit like suggesting that, although the evidence strongly suggests that a certain drug is not effective as a cure for a disease, there is still a point in taking it because it may have a placebo effect. In a sense, the claim is true, but it is also bound to be deeply disappointing to a patient in the throes of a painful illness. The problem with the indirect benefits account of petitionary prayer is that it succeeds in establishing that petitionary prayer has a point only at the price of redefining and watering down the sense in which petitioners hope that prayer has a point. Yes, under the indirect benefits account, petitionary prayer has a point (facilitating the fruition of additional moral and cognitive benefits by satisfying a divine

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requirement for the release of goods God was already in principle willing to provide before they were prayed for). But this hardly is *the* point believers attach to petitionary prayer (establishing a direct line of communication with God and convincing Him to intervene in a situation to make it better). In a believer's mind, the point of petitionary prayer is not to serve as an import duty to be paid in order to (a) get God's shipment to clear customs and (b) collect some kind of compliance reward (the indirect benefits). Rather, the point of petitionary prayer *is to have God make the shipment in the first place*, not in the misguided sense of attempting to force God to give but in the far more respectful sense of imploring God, often at the most desperate hour, for what only He can give.

A believer would probably not even recognize petitionary prayer in a description recasting it as a practice God requires of human beings in order that they receive certain indirect benefits. When she prays for health during an illness, a believer does not think 'I pray because God can restore my health and desires to do so, but decides to remain inactive unless I pray to Him because He wants me to enjoy the indirect benefits that attach to having to petition Him for what I need'. From a believer's point of view, this sounds circuitous and casts God in a patronizing and manipulative role at the very time when the believer is most in need of aid, comfort, and love. The indirect benefits account appears unsatisfactory when placed against the background of what petitioners typically take themselves to be doing when they pray. A pain-ridden believer who prays for health knows nothing of the indirect benefits of petitionary prayer. She simply hopes that God will listen to her prayers and ease her pain. Thus, she will not welcome the indirect benefits account as a reason for believing that petitionary prayer has a point. In her mind, petitionary prayer has a point only if it is a direct line of communication with God – one that promises that He will listen to her cry for help and take action to alleviate her suffering.

It seems clear that the indirect benefits account could succeed in showing that petitionary prayer has a point only if believers were willing to accept a re-description of what they are doing when they ask God for something. Since this re-description is bound to appear a distortion when compared with a petitioner's most natural understanding of the role petitionary prayer plays in her relationship with God, it is worth asking whether there is a more effective way than the indirect benefits account to demonstrate that petitionary prayer has a rightful place in a believer's life. Before I introduce my proposal in the next section, let me mention two additional difficulties for the indirect benefits account of petitionary prayer.

First, the claim that petitionary prayer carries the indirect benefit of insight into God's values and will is hard to maintain in the face of the human epistemic predicament. A believer is never in a position to know with certainty that an event was an answer to her prayers as opposed to an answer to someone else's prayers, an event God had already decided to bring about for His own reasons or a natural occurrence (consider a situation where a thunderstorm drenches a farmer's fields after he has prayed for rain). Given this uncertainty, a believer cannot

establish any reliable correlations between the events that follow her prayers in time and any facts about God and His will.

Murray (2004) and Murray and Meyers (1994) cited some biblical episodes where God makes His will known in a direct and unequivocal way. However, they conceded that such cases must be regarded as exceedingly rare. Murray and Meyers (1994) also suggested that believers can be justified in holding that certain events were God's answers to their prayers in much the same way as a professor who asked a colleague at another university to send her a paper of his is justified in believing that he answered her request when a copy of the paper comes in the mail. Given the hiddenness of God, however, and the mysterious ways in which He is said to operate, it seems to me that believers are never in a predicament comparable to that of the professor in Murray and Meyers's example. A situation that may be construed as God's answer to a person's prayers will typically be a particular event or a decision made by someone other than the petitioner. But events and human decisions can always be traced back to natural and human causes. This allows for explanations that effectively compete with divine intervention and place the believer in a far more uncertain epistemic situation than the person at the centre of Murray and Meyer's example. A hospitalized man who prays for health may see his condition unexpectedly improve a few days later. But he regains his health *while in the care of doctors and nurses*. So, a medical explanation effectively competes with one based on divine intervention in response to prayer. A woman who loses her job and prays for help with her rent may get a reprieve from an initially inflexible landlord. But human beings *can* make compassionate decisions even when these conflict with certain other traits of their character. Even if the landlord's change of heart were the consequence of divine inspiration triggered by the woman's prayers, an explanation based solely on human factors would not appear vastly less likely than one based on divine intervention. Murray and Meyers's example is different. In it, the odds of the paper coming in the mail by pure coincidence pale in comparison with the most natural explanation of the sequence of events: that the paper came because the colleague got the message and put the paper in the mail. It seems to me that believers are very rarely, if ever, presented with situations where divine intervention is the most obvious and natural explanation of a sequence of events. Thus, in terms of justification for her beliefs, the professor in Murray and Meyers's example is in a very different position from a believer who has prayed for *X* and has seen *X* happen or be brought about by another person.[16]

Finally, a third serious difficulty for the indirect benefits account of petitionary prayer is that its plausibility diminishes as the stakes for petitioners rise. The difficulty is especially evident against the background of certain general intuitions about the relationship between parents and children:

> We can, for example, easily imagine a parent not buying a toy for a child until asked so that the child does not become demanding or dominated, or so that the child comes to recognize the

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> source of the desired item and thus increases her faith in her parent's goodness. But can we imagine any of these reasons justifying a parent's decision to refrain from giving a child enough food to develop properly or shielding a child from abuse until asked by the child to do so? (Basinger (2004), 261)

If a person desires, say, a promotion at work, it seems plausible to believe that God may make prayer a precondition of His lending His assistance because He wants the petitioner to receive the indirect benefits of petitionary prayer. But if the survivors of a shipwreck find themselves in a lifeboat that is about to capsize in a storm at sea, it is much harder to believe that a perfectly good God would be ready to withhold His assistance unless He is properly petitioned to intervene.[17] In other words, the indirect benefits account only seems plausible in situations where the good asked for is roughly on a par with – or less important than – the indirect benefits to be derived from the practice of prayer. However, the most significant instances of petitionary prayer happen at the darkest hour, in those life-and-death situations where the goods prayed for (e.g. survival of self or immediate family, protection against grievous bodily harm, etc.) vastly outweigh goods like appreciation for community or protection against spoiling. In these kinds of situations, it is hard to imagine that God would value the indirect benefits of petitionary prayer so much that He would refuse to intervene unless suitably petitioned by those in need or by other members of the religious community.

Two conceptions of God

In the face of the difficulties raised by the indirect benefits account, my proposal is to seek a different approach to the idea of petitionary prayer. We must reflect on the conception of God that generated the argument for the pointlessness of petitionary prayer in the first place and then we must refine that conception so that it remains consistent with the central beliefs of monotheism but also preserves the notion that petitionary prayer is efficacious and therefore not pointless.

As we have seen, the argument for the pointlessness of petitionary prayer emphasizes the divine attributes of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Because of its focus on His perfection, the argument describes God as the infallible manager of the universe – as the Supreme Being who controls every event and every development in His creation, steering the world's course towards the most efficient realization of the goals He set for it. Because God's judgement in all matters pertaining to the world's future is infallible, it is no wonder that there appears to be little room left for the efficacy of human petitions. Such petitions will either be in accordance with God's plan, and thus superfluous, or in conflict with it, and thus bound to remain unanswered.

However, the infallible manager is not the only conception of God monotheists can form and place at the centre of their faith. Many religious people, for example, would readily assent to propositions like the following:

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1. Human beings are free and responsible agents.
2. God acknowledges and values the independence of His human creatures. He seeks to establish a friendship and partnership with them, realizing His plan for the world with them and through them, not despite them.
3. The divinely ordained supreme good that is the ultimate goal of the universe is multiply realizable, in the sense that its coming to pass is compatible with as many alternative sequences of events as are brought about by the fact that human beings are free and responsible agents.
4. An immense amount of evil exists in the world, but this fact is not inconsistent with God's perfect love for His creatures. There is a reason behind the suffering human beings endure in this life, although such a reason may be fully apparent only to God.

The first two propositions are cornerstones of a familiar religious framework, one that may be termed 'free-will theism'.[18] The fourth proposition highlights the fact that, while the problem of evil is deeply unsettling, believers typically hold that it has a solution. Even at the most trying of times, the faithful view themselves as surrounded by God's love and accept suffering as a fundamental component of life. The third proposition is probably the only one that requires some commentary. An illustration can serve to explain it.

Suppose I decided to make a radical change to my life, enrolling in medical school and eventually becoming a neurologist. This sequence of choices and actions would introduce a number of changes into the world. Many future events, decisions, and situations would be different from how they would have been if I had not decided to make a career change from philosophy to medicine. However, a theist would not doubt that, despite all these changes, God's plan for the world will still be realized. From a theistic standpoint, the realization of God's ultimate goals for the universe is not tied to the completion of a single particular sequence of events, so that, if any of the events in that sequence were disrupted, God's plan would fail. Instead, theists view God's plan as multiply realizable, namely as compatible with as many sequences of events as the free choices of human beings may bring about. The world as it is now and the world as it would become if I became a neurologist are both worlds in which God's plan will be realized. A theist believes that the Kingdom of God will certainly come, regardless of which particular configuration of future events is created by my decisions and those of all other human beings.

In other words, free-will theists believe that the infallibility of God's plan for the world is compatible with the fact that human beings are free agents who can steer the world in new and unexpected directions. This belief is clearly open to philosophical scrutiny and raises difficulties that have been the subject of much debate.[19] In general, however, believers do not regard the difficulties as

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insurmountable or as providing them with a reason for abandoning their faith. The type of monotheism that is at the centre of the present article is firmly committed both to the notion of human freedom and to the belief that the Kingdom of God will come – not as a matter of coincidence or good fortune, but because it *must* come by divine decree. Believers hold that the apparent conflict between human freedom and God's providential decrees can be resolved.

Now that the idea that God's plan for the world is multiply realizable has come into sharper focus, we can start following its implications for petitionary prayer. Taken together, the beliefs listed above pave the way for replacing the image of God as infallible manager of the universe with a conception of the divine that characterizes God as a loving partner. From this new vantage point, petitionary prayer no longer appears pointless. Instead, it is revealed as an important element in the relationship between human beings and God. The following example can help us understand this shift in perspective.

Imagine that a woman and her husband are preparing to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. She has arranged for a celebration and has reserved a table at the best restaurant in town. She believes she has made an excellent plan, but her husband proposes that they should go to a different restaurant instead. The place is not as elegant and renowned as the woman's original choice, but her husband is especially fond of it because it is the restaurant the two of them had dinner at on their first date many years earlier. The woman accepts her husband's proposal. She understands that the food and ambience will be somewhat different from what she had thought would be best for the celebration, but she loves her husband dearly and knows that, whichever restaurant they dine at, the evening will still be immensely pleasant and memorable.

This hypothetical situation illustrates certain interpersonal dynamics that are not easy to capture in words but are familiar nevertheless. When someone moves from a position of deep love for another, she values and encourages her loved one's alternative choices even when they depart from a previously formulated (and perhaps even ideal) notion of what is best. As long as the alternative conduces to a good that is consistent with the good that had originally been identified as the main target, the pursuit of the alternative is not seen as a derailment, but as a sort of new and positive synthesis, one that is so much more valuable because it acknowledges and incorporates the other person's autonomous contributions.

For the woman in our example, the choice of which restaurant to go to is less important than her bond with her husband, a bond that she knows will make for a very satisfying celebration regardless of where the two of them dine. As long as there is an appropriate celebration, the woman's love for her husband inspires her to leave behind any desire she may have to get exactly what she wants. One may say that she is open to exploring her husband's vision of the good. She is attempting to see the situation from his perspective and to identify with his feelings. This leads her to focusing more on the overall agreement

between her goals and his than on her original plan. Celebrating the occasion with her husband in a way that underscores the depth of their bond is more important to her than managing all aspects of the celebration in the exact way she had originally planned.

From the perspective of the example we have just examined, it is fairly easy to formulate a conception of petitionary prayer that does not inevitably lead to an argument for its pointlessness. If God approaches His relationship with human beings not as an infallible manager but as an open-minded and loving partner, then petitionary prayer cannot be pointless. Rather, it must be efficacious *by divine choice*. For a God who intends to be a loving partner to human beings and wants to involve them in the realization of His plans for the world must choose to listen to at least some of their petitions, when these present to Him a vision of the future that contributes to His plans even if it does not lead to their realization in the supremely effective way only He would be capable of coordinating. Taking seriously the idea that God wants to propel the world towards its metaphysical destination *with* His human creatures and not despite them requires accepting, as a matter of theistic faith, that at least on some occasions God chooses to be open to the vision of the good that a human being creates and puts before Him.

If the supreme good is multiply realizable, nothing prevents God from selecting the path to it that is most compatible with the value He assigns to His relationship with human beings. An omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God who wants a close collaborative relationship with His human creatures does not have to choose the most direct route to the realization of His goals. Instead, He may prefer an alternative route, one that incorporates the most deserving requests that come to Him from the human world. Seen in this light, petitionary prayer is revealed as an essential element in the relationship between God and human beings. Petitionary prayer provides the raw material from which God can shape a future that includes and valorizes human projects, desires, and aspirations – a future exemplifying not just God's supremacy, but also, and more importantly, His free decision to partner with human beings and give form to the world with them.

Petitionary prayer as vision of the good

The conception of petitionary prayer I am defending has the advantage of being immune from the difficulties the indirect benefits account runs into. As noted above, the indirect benefits account does not succeed in establishing that petitionary prayer has a point in a sufficiently robust sense of 'having a point'. From the perspective of a collaborative model of petitionary prayer, on the other hand, believers are perfectly justified in holding that their petitions have a point. For them, the efficacy of petitionary prayer descends directly from a set of basic beliefs about the nature of God and the relationship He wants to establish

with human beings. If one believes in a God who aims to be a loving partner to human beings and is willing to make adjustments to His plan to accommodate some of their most deserving requests, then one can also reasonably believe that, over time, God has answered at least some human prayers and will continue to do so in the future. One can believe that God is open to letting human beings change His mind and surprise Him with the degree to which they are able to suggest their own ways of participating in the realization of His goals. This creates the space where human petitions can sincerely be believed to be efficacious.

Moreover, unlike the indirect benefits account, the conception of petitionary prayer that emphasizes God's collaborative partnership with His creatures does not require that human beings should be able to derive certain cognitive benefits from God's response, or indifference, to their petitions. A person who has prayed for something and has seen it happen will never know – at least in this life – whether it was God who granted it. But this is not a problem if that person views God as the other party to a relationship. Even in the closest of partnerships, there are things about the other person that remain forever hidden. Sincere believers accept that. They do not petition God so that they can learn more about His will by measuring how He responded to their prayers or refused to do so. They petition God because they believe that He is the sort of God who is willing to listen to the prayers of those who suffer. The fact that, on occasion, certain favourable outcomes that were prayed for do occur is not (or at least should not be) automatically converted into the fanatic certainty that God has intervened in human affairs. The pensive and intelligent believer deals more in faith and personal growth than in dogmatic certainty. She will notice the favourable event, reflect on how her faith allows her to hope that it was a divine response to prayer, and continue to take action to build a relationship with a loving but hidden God.

Finally, a collaborative model of petitionary prayer does not require that its proponents explain why God would wait until requested to bring about something good. As mentioned above, the indirect benefits account struggles with explaining why a perfectly good God would make prayer a precondition of His intervention in life-and-death situations or in circumstances under which the indirect benefits of prayer do not appear to outweigh the goods prayed for. The collaborative model of petitionary prayer does not encounter this difficulty because it makes sense of the petitionary situation in a different way. Let us see how.

On the indirect benefits account, God is viewed as coming to the petitionary situation with a preformed judgement that is already in accord with the petitioners' requests. In the case of the shipwreck survivors, God both desires that they be saved and has the power to save them. But then it is hard to understand why God would withhold His assistance unless petitioned. The survivors' fruition of the indirect benefits of petitionary prayer does not seem to be a sufficiently

important good for God to set petitionary prayer as a precondition of His intervention.

On the collaborative model of petitionary prayer, on the other hand, God is not assumed to have a preformed attitude consonant with the petitioners' prayers. An undeniable fact about the world is that many innocents suffer and die. For example, countless people have died and continue to die in shipwrecks. However, as pointed out above, believers find comfort in proposition 4:

> An immense amount of evil exists in the world, but this fact is not inconsistent with God's perfect love for His creatures. There is a reason behind the suffering human beings endure in this life, although such a reason may be fully apparent only to God.

From a religious standpoint, the course of the world may be in accord with God's will even when it contains the death of a group of innocent people in a lifeboat. Indeed, a large part of what it means to be a believer consists precisely in accepting the idea that suffering is never in vain and the world's tragedies have an explanation in an ultimate mystery that underscores God's love for humanity instead of conflicting with it. On the collaborative model of petitionary prayer, God is seen as coming to the petitionary situation with the understanding that the world is set on its proper course even when the immediate future of some of His creatures involves suffering and death. The lifeboat situation is not one where God desires to intervene but waits until someone petitions Him. Rather, the lifeboat situation is one where God – in a way that is bound to appear painfully mysterious from our limited earthly point of view – fully accepts a turn of events that can only strike human beings as a tragedy.

Yet, if we take seriously the idea that God wants to be a loving partner to humanity and His ultimate goals for the world are multiply realizable, then the kinds of situations where human beings pray their most desperate prayers must also be situations where God is willing to listen. They must be situations where He may be open to replacing one good (the course of the world as He had set it) with another (the course of the world as one or more human beings suggest it to Him). On the indirect benefits account, God and those who pray to Him are of one mind. This makes it hard to understand why God would wait for the petition in order to take action. On the collaborative model of petitionary prayer, God and those who pray to Him are initially of different minds; however, because of His love for humanity, God is willing to listen to His creatures and change His mind to work their contributions into the world he freely decided to build with them.

A characteristic of petitionary prayer that interpreters have generally overlooked lends force to the account I am defending. The most deserving human petitions are best interpreted as visions of the good. They are ways in which human beings communicate to God what they believe should be granted because it is good or averted because it is bad. Imagine the state of mind of a man who has

just discovered that his wife has contracted a deadly disease. As a believer, the man must accept that a world that contains his wife's premature death is still God's world – one where he, his wife, and their children are immensely loved by God even as they suffer for reasons they cannot understand. In addition to being a believer, however, the man is also a husband and father. His shock and grief after hearing the diagnosis may prompt him to pray to God and suggest a change of course. He may ask God to replace the world as it is – a world that is moving towards his wife's premature death – with a world where she lives. He may offer to God the idea of this world as an alternative that preserves some very important goods and contributes in a different but equally significant way to God's plans.

Thus, in formulating his prayer, the man may ask God to heal his wife so that she continues to play a central role in raising the couple's children. He may express a concern with the trauma the children would suffer if they lost their mother at an early age, and he may suggest in his prayers that he and his children would be better able to do God's work in the world if they did not have to cope with the loss of a person so close to them. Many variations are possible, depending on the circumstances of the people involved. As a whole, however, it seems correct to say that the man's prayers on his wife's behalf constitute an attempt to establish before God that some important goods would continue to be present in the world if she lived.[20] The man is trying to communicate to God his vision of what is good, in the conviction that a loving God is in principle open to striking a compromise between His plans and the suggestions that come to Him from the human world.

It is in situations of this type that God, if He is by choice a loving partner and not simply an infallible manager, may choose to listen to a human petition and act upon it. On this account of petitionary prayer, if the ultimate good of the world is multiply realizable and the petitioner's request presents to God a vision of the good that is consistent with His overall plan for the world, He can choose to accede to the request. He can choose to move the world towards a new stage that has value in His eyes because it incorporates a creature's vision of the good and reflects some deserving and heartfelt human desires, hopes, and projects.

It should thus be clear that a collaborative model of petitionary prayer allows a believer to sidestep the argument for the pointlessness of petitionary prayer and embrace the practice without reservation. The restrictions imposed by the infallible manager conception of God are lifted, and those who view God as a loving partner can believe without contradiction that petitionary prayer is efficacious. They can view God as open to His creatures' perspectives on the good and willing to have them participate in the realization of His plan for the universe. When one shifts the focus from God's utilitarian wisdom to His desire to partner with human beings, the argument for the pointlessness of petitionary prayer no longer gets off the ground, because the principle that God never departs from the most direct and effective way of realizing His goals is rejected.

Whether, in general, believers have better reasons for viewing God as a loving partner than for conceiving of Him along the lines of an infallible manager is a question that remains beyond the scope of the present article. It should be noted, however, that the image of God as a loving partner is certainly in line with many forms of monotheism and with the basic eschatological intuition that the realization of God's plan for the world crucially involves human decisions and actions. If history is the way to eternity and God actively seeks to establish a partnership and collaboration with human beings in realizing His ultimate goals for the world, then the argument for the pointlessness of petitionary prayer loses much of its force. For the argument presupposes that God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence encase Him in an absolute autonomy that mandates the selection of what is best in a way that excludes any input from the human world. However, if breaking the shell of this autonomy in order to establish a voluntary and loving partnership with human beings is an essential aspect of the divine nature, then God Himself must be willing to listen to His creatures' prayers, treating their petitions as opportunities for shaping the world with them.[21]

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Notes

1. Here, the 'because' is understood in terms of 'God's reasons for doing things' (Davison (2009), 289). Proposition (4) captures the idea that *P*'s praying for *E* provided God with the reason, or at least with one of the reasons, for bringing about *E*.
2. Except in a purely idiomatic sense. 'This is the answer to my prayers' is commonly used to mean 'this is a very favourable development for me'.
3. > After all, in the same way that there can be coincidences involving prayers for bad things, there can be coincidences involving prayers for good things, too. It could happen, for example, that the event in question was a very important part of God's plan for the world, in such a way that God's bringing it about was not related at all to anyone's prayers. (*ibid*., 287)

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4. 'Some people have a rather magical view of the power of prayer according to which God is literally compelled to answer certain prayers, but this view is highly at odds with traditional theism' (*ibid.*, 290).
5. *Ibid.*
6. On this point, see Stump (1979), 82–83.
7. See also Stump (1979), 81–85.
8. See Murray & Meyers (1994), 313: 'the theist must show that there is (or at least could be) some state of affairs God intends to bring about through petitionary prayer that could not be brought about through the provision alone'.
9. See also Murray (2004).
10. 'With each prayer of petition, the believer is forcefully reminded that she is directly dependent on God for her provisions in life. As a result, the creature is kept from that sort of idolatry that leads her to look only to nature or her neighbor for her daily bread rather than God' (Murray & Meyers (1994), 314).
11. And perhaps also on those occasions when they do *not* receive what they asked for, if the pain of dealing with unanswered prayers for a particular good finds consolation in the thought that God still provides many other great goods at all times.
12.

> 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 petitions. In doing so, God can teach his creatures in much the way that parents teach children when they honor or fail to honor their requests. When my children ask for chocolate bars for breakfast and I deny the request, I hope to teach them something about eating well and maintaining their health. When I deny my children's requests to forgo doing their homework, I hope to show them something about the importance of learning and meeting their obligations. (Murray (2004), 249)

13. On this point, see also *ibid.*, 251: '[Other-directed prayer] serves the more direct purpose of making the community of believers aware of each other's needs so that they themselves can meet them . . . . When petitioners are confronted with the needs of others directly, they are moved not only to intercede for them but to provide for them themselves.'
14. See also Murray & Meyers (1994), 327.
15. See Davison (2009), 288 and n. 5. As an example, Davison cites the fact that the act itself of praying for strength can give a person strength without any involvement on God's part.
16. For additional criticisms of Murray and Meyers' example, see Basinger (1995), 476–480. See also Basinger (2004), 259, and Davison (2009), 293–294.
17. And if the boat does capsize and its occupants do die, as so many innocent people tragically suffer and die in the world, it would sound shallow and insensitive to claim that they died because they did not pray, or did not pray with sufficiently strong faith, etc. The problem of evil only becomes more burning when one proposes an easy solution to it. Quick fixes like 'they did not pray' or 'they did not pray in the right way' are ad hoc at best and disrespectful of human suffering at worst.
18. On the distinction between free-will theism, on the one hand, and process theism and theological determinism, on the other, see Basinger (2004), 256.
19. For an excellent discussion of possible answers to the question 'How can human beings be truly free in a world that is providentially ordained?', see Davison (1999).
20. Notice that this applies to all forms of petitionary prayer, including those in which the petitioner asks for something on his or her own behalf. If the man in our example had discovered that *he* was seriously ill, he would probably have phrased his prayers in terms similar to the ones he used for his wife. Those who pray for their own recovery or for safety from danger – or even simply for their daily bread – are ultimately asking God to recognize that their continued presence in the world is a good worth preserving.
21. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for a set of very helpful comments. I would also like to thank William Allegrezza, Jonathyne Briggs, David Parnell, and Christopher Young for their comments, suggestions, and support.