Praying for known outcomes

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Abstract: **In this paper, I consider what difference knowledge of outcomes – both past and future – might make to the rationality of praying for them on a traditional theistic model. More specifically, I address four questions: (1)'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows will obtain?'; (2)'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows will not obtain?'; (3)'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows have obtained?'; (4)'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows have not obtained?'. I argue that, on certain common theistic assumptions, the answer to all of these questions is yes.**

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because, as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.
                                                                                           DONALD RUMSFELD

In his book *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, C. S. Lewis tells us that,

> When we are praying about the result, say, of a battle … the thought will often cross our minds that (if only we knew it) 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. The contribution is made in eternity or 'before all worlds'.[1]

On Lewis's view, God is outside time and thus sees the whole history of the universe – its cosmic shape – in a Boethian/Thomistic 'eternal now', or, as Lewis puts it, 'in eternity or ''before all worlds''', the scare quotation marks around 'before all worlds' being there, we may infer with some confidence, to draw our

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attention to the fact that it is not literally so, as it would have been on a temporalist understanding of God's eternality. From the non-spatio-temporal point of view of eternity, God creates a spatio-temporal world from the infinite number of possibilities open to Him, and He displays in this act of creation a *ceteris paribus* preference for actualizing worlds which display a cosmic shape whereby prayers are answered in the ways that those praying in those worlds wish, regardless of the temporal relation of the prayer to the incident that it is a prayer about. Thus, on an atemporalist understanding such as Lewis's, it makes sense to pray for particular outcomes in battles that have yet to be fought and to pray for particular outcomes in battles that have been fought, because every prayer uttered, from the first to the last, is equally before God's mind when He atemporally shapes the cosmos, and the God who atemporally shapes the cosmos is the God who cares about the wishes of the creatures in the cosmos and shapes it in light of them.[2]

In expounding this view, Aquinas uses the analogy of someone (the analogue of God) on a mountain being able to look down on a path at its base and see all the walkers on it (the analogues of us) simultaneously, whereas the walkers on the path can only see those immediately in front and behind them. On a number of occasions Lewis himself draws on the analogy of writing a book in order to explain it. When writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis's friend Tolkien did not write the section detailing the Battle of Helm's Deep before the battle, nor did he write it afterwards, nor again did he write it simultaneously with the battle. Tolkien stood on an entirely different timeline to that on which the characters in the book that he was writing stand. Tolkien no doubt had in mind, when he was redrafting passages describing incidents that happened earlier on the Middle Earth timeline, incidents which happened later, so as to give the overall composition a better 'cosmic shape', but this did not entail his having to imbue the characters in his novels with a power of backwards causation or some such. Every character's every decision was in what would be to the characters in the book, were they to be able to conceive of it, the 'eternal now' of the consciousness of the author of their story, their creator.

Of course, this is only an analogy. The author of *The Lord of the Rings* is not in the timeline of the characters of the book he writes, as is the author of an autobiography, but he is nevertheless in *a* timeline, whereas the author of the real world, God, is supposed by the model not to be in any timeline at all. And there are no doubt worries that one might have with the model as such, regardless of what analogies one uses to get a grip on it. Aren't there insuperable problems with the B-theory of time on which it rests? What place can there be for libertarian free will in this picture? But the only point salient to the topic that I address here is that, on the model, there are not *more* worries raised by past-directed prayers than there are by future-directed prayers simply by virtue of their being past-directed rather than future-directed. It may be that retroactive prayer as we might call it (it is called various things by various authors) is coherent on views other

than a Lewisian eternalism. (Kevin Timpe in his paper 'Prayers for the past' in *Religious Studies*[3] makes a persuasive case that it is), but at least some instances of it are non-problematically coherent on a Lewisian eternalism (assuming this sort of eternalism is itself coherent).[4]

It is obvious that Lewis has in mind in this passage a battle which has occurred or has at least been 'decided' as he puts it (perhaps it is still going on, but the certainty of a final victory for one party over the other has been secured by what has already happened in it) and the result of which is as yet unknown to the person considering praying about it. Thus the parenthetical 'if only we knew'. In this paper, I wish to consider what difference *knowledge* of outcomes – both past and future – might make to the rationality of praying for them. On eternalism of Lewis's sort, one can rationally pray for unknowns, past or future. Can one also rationally pray for these, as Donald Rumsfeld might put it, 'knowns'? More specifically, there are four questions that I'll be looking at: (1) 'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows will obtain?'; (2) 'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows will not obtain?'; (3) 'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows have obtained?'; (4) 'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows have not obtained?'. I shall look at these questions in this order and argue that the answer to all of them is yes. Some – Lewis himself in a passage we'll come to in due course – have sought to make the rationality question moot for at least some known outcomes by claiming that it is psychologically impossible that one might pray for these things. The suggestion has been that it's psychologically impossible for anyone to know that an outcome has not obtained and yet pray for it, rather as it would be impossible to know what a square circle would have to look like and yet try to draw one. We'll need to consider – and refute – these arguments in due course to get to positive answers to the rationality questions. As we shall see, what is and is not psychologically possible is a complex matter, some of the complexities of which we shall need to address in order to show that a necessary condition of a prayer for a known outcome's being rational (that it be psychologically possible for the knower in question) be met. We'll start with the least contentious questions and approach these more contentious ones via them. The example I shall use to focus my discussion is that of the Battle of Waterloo.

Imagine yourself as Wellington watching the Battle of Waterloo unfold before you and willing, 'Would God that night or Blücher would come'. Suddenly, emerging out of the smoke of the battle on one's flank, a new influx of soldiers comes streaming in. 'It is either Grouchy for Napoleon or it is Blücher for us!' On this the whole battle may be settled. You strain desperately through your telescope for the answer. Suddenly a gust of wind catches one of the standards that the soldiers carry before them and it unfurls. 'It's Blücher! The day is ours!' Could it yet be psychologically possible and, if possible, could it yet be rational for you at that stage to pray that you will win? I am assuming in my somewhat imaginative retelling of history that with the arrival of Blücher's men the final allied victory is

secured and that, as Wellington, you know it to be so, so you know that this particular battle has not merely been decided, i.e. passed the crucial stage so that now final victory is secured for one party rather than another, but also which way it has been decided; it has been decided in your favour. It seems obvious that there need not be any psychological obstacle to your praying that you will win when you already know in this way that you will win. We may recall Jesus praying that Lazarus be resurrected, even though – as he himself reports – he already knew that this prayer would be answered in the way that he wished it to be, i.e. by a resurrection. So the only real question here can be the one of the rationality of praying for the outcome one knows will obtain.

An important obstacle for us to sweep out of the way in order to make progress towards a positive answer to this and the other questions to which we'll be addressing ourselves is infallibilism, the view that for genuine knowledge it must be impossible that the belief that constitutes knowledge be false. If infallibilism is true, then of course one never knows anything about the future, or indeed the present or the past, so there are no known outcomes to pray for and the object of my discussion disappears. But we all do think we know things about the future, for example that the sun will rise tomorrow; the present, for example that the sun is shining; and the past, for example that the sun shone yesterday. We all think this even though we equally think that it's just possible that a meteorite will destroy the Earth in the next five minutes; that we drifted into sleep a few moments ago and are currently dreaming of a sunny day when the reality is a rainy one; and that it wasn't yesterday that the sun shone, it was the day before, but we slept right through the rainy day in between. Thus, we all think infallibilism is wrong. Whilst a defence of this thought of ours would be a worthy subject for papers if not books, it is not the topic of this paper, so allow me to assume it is right in what follows. Unless one is an infallibilist about knowledge then, one will think that one's knowing that one will win is compatible with one's knowing that it is nevertheless yet possible that one might lose, and so, in praying that oneself as Wellington win after one has observed Blücher's troops arrive, one is merely doing what one is doing when one prays for any outcome, praying that the possibility of that outcome not obtaining not in fact be actualized. The only difference between this case and the more usual is that one's assessment of the probability of an outcome other than the one which one most desires obtaining is already such as to make one optimistic to the extent of saying that one knows that one's prayer will be answered as one wishes.

Of course the mere fact that our knowing something is compatible with the possibility of our being mistaken about it will not suffice to render prayers for known outcomes such as this reasonable. However, if we add two further assumptions, this will be sufficient to render prayers for known outcomes such as this reasonable. The assumptions are, firstly, that the opportunity cost of praying for an outcome which it is reasonable to hope will obtain, e.g. (I am supposing) a

victory for the allies at Waterloo, is negligible and, secondly, that there is a God who, when deciding on the 'cosmic shape' of the universe 'before all worlds', takes a positive interest in the prayerfully expressed wishes of the creatures in it, i.e. when one adds to this Lewis's account. Putting oneself in Wellington's boots, one may think of it like this. 'Depending on whether I pray or not, God will either be eternally holding in His mind the fact that I pray for a particular outcome or He will be eternally holding in His mind the fact that I do not pray when He decides ''before all worlds'' on the ''cosmic shape'' of the world He actualizes. There are logically possible worlds in which I don't pray and in which Napoleon wins against all the odds even after Blücher's men have started appearing. The evidence is now such that I may say that I know I live in a world in which Napoleon will not win, but I cannot be certain that I'm not in one of these other logically possible worlds where he wins even after Blücher's men have started to arrive. It may very well be better to be safe than sorry, to add my little bit to the cosmic shape such that the God who answers prayers is less likely from eternity to make one of the logically possible worlds where Napoleon wins even after Blücher's men have arrived be the actual world. Therefore, I'll pray.' Thus, it can be reasonable to pray for an outcome that one knows will obtain. What about praying for one which one knows will not obtain?

If we suppose Napoleon to be in the same epistemic position as Wellington with merely a different evaluation of the desirability of Wellington's winning, at the moment we are considering, we may say that he now knows that he will lose the battle, but it is still yet psychologically possible that he prays that he will win. When one buys a lottery ticket, one knows that the chances of one's winning are so fantastically small that unless one is an infallibilist one is very likely to say that one knows one will not win; yet one may nevertheless pray that one will win. But what of the rationality of praying that one will win? Putting oneself in Napoleon's boots it seems that the same considerations apply, *mutatis mutandis*, as applied to Wellington. One may think of it like this. 'With the arrival of Blücher's men, the evidence is now so stacked up that the probability that the actual world is one of the logically possible worlds in which I win the Battle of Waterloo is terribly small, but I also know that God will have taken into account whether or not I pray to win in deciding which logically possible world to make actual. In deciding ''before all worlds'' which world to actualize, God has a *ceteris paribus* preference for worlds where there is a fit between prayerfully expressed wishes and the world. As I may still win against all the odds and I increase my chances of winning by praying, so I'll pray.' Putting oneself in the place of Napoleon as Blücher's men come into view, one's cause looks lost, but it may yet not be lost and thus one might yet pray that it not be lost, and, on a Lewisian eternalism at least, increase one's chances of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

I conclude then that, on a Lewisian eternalism, one can rationally pray for an outcome that one knows will obtain and one can rationally pray for an outcome

that one knows will not obtain, even though in the former case one knows that one's prayer will be answered (as one wishes) and in the latter case one knows that one's prayer will not be answered (as one wishes). One knows these things, but one also knows one might be wrong about them and that praying makes it more likely that one won't be wrong in the former case and more likely that one will be wrong in the latter. Praying increases one's chance of getting what one wishes. The psychological possibility of praying for an outcome is but a necessary condition for rational prayer, not itself sufficient. But in these cases it is obviously psychologically possible to pray and, unless one is an infallibilist about knowledge, it can be rational on a Lewisian model to so pray. It can be rational to pray that the Earth not be destroyed by a meteorite and that one's lottery numbers come up even though knowing that the chances of the Earth's being destroyed by a meteorite and one's lottery numbers coming up are fantastically small. So one may be confident as one prays that the first prayer will in fact be answered in the way that one wishes and the second will in fact not be answered in the way that one wishes, confident to the extent of claiming knowledge of these future outcomes.

So far we have been considering future-directed prayers for knowns and the future is known in a very different way from the past. Indeed some would say that, unlike the past, it is not known at all, as it has to be inferred from the past or present on the assumption that the future will resemble the past. Such people might eschew infallibilism yet still maintain that the future cannot be known and thus that the substance of the issue of future-directed prayers for knowns disappears. In addressing the first two questions, I have been assuming that we are not amongst such people, taking instead the more commonsensical view that we do sometimes know things about the future, for example that the sun will rise tomorrow. Nevertheless, there is one regard in which, on theism, knowledge of the future is less secure than knowledge of the past. On theism, there is a God who can perform law-violating miracles in response to prayers. Thus, natural processes in a particular situation might be such as to lead one to expect that a certain outcome – say the loss of a battle – will obtain with whatever is required to make it the case that this belief counts as knowledge. However, if one believes that there's a God, then of course one's knowing oneself to be in this position is quite compatible with there yet being an intervention of a law-violating sort; and one may know that praying is just the sort of thing that one has reason to suppose increases the chances of there being such. At the moment of deciding whether or not to pray, one can have no reason at all from one's experience to suppose that there will or that there will not be a law-violating miracle, for of course law-violating miracles are not caused in the way that naturally-explicable events are and are thus not even probabilistically predictable on the evidence that one will have gathered about how the battle is going to turn out prior to deciding whether or not to pray. The same is not true, however, of events in the past. In praying

about an outcome that is past and that one already takes oneself to know about, one will already take oneself to know whether or not there was a miraculous intervention involved. The contrast may be seen by imagining the difference between watching an avalanche rushing towards one's best friend, knowing that – unless there is a miracle – he or she will die when it reaches him or her in a few seconds time, and knowing from having heard a radio report that one's best friend has been killed in an avalanche, his or her body having just been recovered and identified. In the first instance, one does not have any evidence that God will not miraculously intervene; in the second situation, one does have evidence that God did not miraculously intervene.

All of this makes positive answers to our first two questions easier to accept than positive answers to our last two questions. Let us turn then to consider these last two questions: is it rational to pray for outcomes that one knows have obtained or to pray for outcomes that one knows have not obtained?

The Battle of Waterloo happened some 200 years ago. It is at the least much more psychologically difficult for us to pray now that Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo than it would have been for us to pray that Wellington would win it immediately after having seen Blücher's men join his. We now know beyond the possibility of any serious doubt that Wellington did win and thus, on a Lewisian model, that the 'cosmic shape' of our world is such as to mean that God did 'before all worlds' act so that Wellington won. (I am assuming that we have no reason to suppose that God acted miraculously so as to effect the victory, but rather that it was naturally explicable given the equally naturally explicable arrival of Blücher's men.) Nevertheless, it is, I shall suggest, not psychologically impossible to pray that Wellington won, even today some 200 years later, for it is still logically possible that he might not have won, even though the suppositions that would be forced on us were we to believe that he didn't win – that a world-wide conspiracy by historians has remained undetected for 200 years – are too enormous for us seriously to doubt his victory.

A helpful analogy might be that it is hard to motivate oneself to keep taking the particular medicine that the doctor has prescribed for the treatment of one's illness after one has recovered from the illness for which he or she prescribed it and once one realizes that there is nothing but a vanishingly negligible danger of relapse, but it is not impossible, as there is always a slight danger. Similarly, I suggest, it will be hard to motivate oneself to pray that Wellington won at Waterloo now that we have 200 years of historical scholarship convincing us that the fact is that he did win. But perhaps we might gain our motivation by thinking along Lewisian lines: the fact that he did win was in part due to the fact that we, 200 years after the event, prayed that he won; after all, we will think, if we do now pray that Wellington won, this fact will be in God's mind 'before all worlds' and thus what Lewis might call a contributory cause of God's choice to actualize whichever logically possible world it is that He does actualize in creation. This

knowledge might, it seems to me, be enough to motivate us to pray that Wellington won, as we know he did. So I conclude that it is quite psychologically possible that we pray that Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo, even when we take ourselves to know that he did win it. Could it be *rational* for us to pray for this? Well, if one thinks that it's a good thing that Wellington won rather than Napoleon (as we are assuming it is), then, assuming the opportunity cost of praying is negligible, the answer seems to me to be yes again. On a Lewisian eternalism, one can now pray that Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo and think that by doing so one is doing one's bit to contribute to the cosmic shape, and thus be a part cause of the fact that he did win it by placing one's prayer into God's mind 'before all worlds'. It strikes me then that it is not too late for us to take part in the Napoleonic Wars on what we know to be the winning side.

What about the losing side? We live in a world where Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo and Napoleon lost it and we live in a world where we all know this. Is it nevertheless psychologically possible that one might pray that *Napoleon* won the Battle of Waterloo? If so, could one yet *reasonably* pray that Napoleon won the battle? Even if we discount the influence of the philosophically uninteresting fact that we have been assuming (that it would have been bad for Europe had Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo and indeed that we are reasonable in believing this), and instead help ourselves to some pro-Napoleon assumptions, the consensus in the literature is that the answer to these questions is certainly no. Eleonore Stump says that, 'It is obviously absurd to pray in 1980 that Napoleon win at Waterloo when one knows what God does not bring about at Waterloo',[5] viz. that Napoleon won, and I would maintain that what is true of 1980 in this regard is equally true these several years later.

If we turn to C. S. Lewis again, we find him summarizing the case for a negative answer to these two questions when he says the following:

> The following question may be asked: If we can reasonably pray for an event which must in fact have happened or failed to happen several hours ago, why can we not pray for an event which we know not to have happened? e.g. pray for the safety of someone who, as we know, was killed yesterday. What makes the difference is precisely our knowledge. The known event states God's will. It is psychologically impossible to pray for what we know to be unobtainable and if it were possible the prayer would sin against the duty of submission to God's known will.[6]

Lewis's conclusion is twofold then: first, that it's psychologically impossible that one pray for an outcome that one knows not to have obtained; and, second, that even if it were possible, it would be a sin to do so. One need merely add to Lewis's claims the claim that to sin in this way would be unreasonable, as it may seem it obviously would be, to get to the conclusion both that one cannot do it and that it would be unreasonable to do it even if one could. From the fact that Lewis goes on to make the second claim about it's being a sin even if it were

psychologically possible, having made the first claim that it is psychologically impossible, one might think that he regards the impossibility spoken of in the first claim as what one might call a 'contingent impossibility', something stemming perhaps from a universal feature of the human mind, a feature which is not of metaphysical or logical necessity shared by all minds. But one need not interpret him in this way. Perhaps he would be inclined to argue that it is logically impossible to pray for what we know to be unobtainable because in conceiving of the object of our desire as something unobtainable – as we must if we are to know it to be unobtainable, in contrast to forgetting that it's unobtainable for a moment or two whilst praying for it – we cannot at the same time will that it obtain. This would then be a psychological impossibility on a par with trying to picture in one's mind's eye a spherical cube. As soon as one realizes what it is one would *per impossibile* be trying to imagine if one followed the instruction 'Picture in your mind's eye a spherical cube', one realizes that one cannot even try to follow the instruction. Let's suppose that this is what Lewis had in mind with this first claim then – knowing that something hasn't happened, e.g. that Napoleon hasn't won the Battle of Waterloo, it is psychologically impossible for one now to pray that it has happened, that he has won it, because knowing that it hasn't happened of necessity disables one from praying that it has happened. Thus Lewis's claim that one's knowledge makes all the difference.

This is an interesting claim and it is prima facie plausible, but it is worth observing two things straight off the bat. Firstly, it is not as obviously right as parallel claims, for example, the fact that knowing that something hasn't happened, e.g. that Napoleon hasn't won the Battle of Waterloo, of necessity disables one from believing that it has happened, that he has won it. Knowing that Napoleon has not won the Battle of Waterloo certainly doesn't prevent one from *wishing* that he had won it and prayer seems a lot more like wishing than it does like believing. Secondly, Lewis has begged a rather important question in his presentation of the issue. If one believed – as Lewis seems to believe in the earlier passage – that it is possible to cause the past by one's current actions, e.g. prayers, then one would think that praying that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo would not be praying that the unobtainable obtain; it would be praying that the obtainable obtain. It would not be praying for an outcome against God's will; it would be praying that God's will be different from what one takes oneself to know it to be (and indeed, we are assuming, does know it to be). Now, perhaps that's a sin – this may be where the second thought of Lewis's originates – but it is quite psychologically possible to sin.

One might reformulate Lewis's point against the psychological possibility of praying that something has happened which one knows not to have happened by saying that it would nevertheless be praying that that which does not have the property of having obtained have the property of having obtained, and that this is a straightforward contradiction, but to this we may imagine two lines of response,

either of which seems adequate to refute the claim that it is psychologically impossible to pray for an outcome one knows not to have obtained. These two lines of response are as follows. (a) 'I believe one can change the past, so I believe it is not any form of contradiction.' Of course, people who respond with a statement of this belief may be revealing themselves to be confused or metaphysically incoherent in it, but that they have the belief at least makes it psychologically possible for them to pray that Napoleon won even when they know that he lost and this is sufficient to refute Lewis's first claim. (b) 'It is not praying that that which does not have the property of having obtained have the property of having obtained; it is not changing the past from whatever it actually was. Rather, it is praying that Napoleon winning the battle have the property of having obtained, whilst believing – indeed I would say knowing – that Napoleon's winning the battle does indeed have the property of not having obtained.' This is another way of thinking that renders it psychologically possible to pray that Napoleon won even when one knows that he lost, *contra* Lewis's first claim, and it has the advantage of not committing one to backwards causation. Either way, Lewis's claim that it is psychologically impossible to pray for an outcome one knows not to have obtained is false.

One may helpfully imagine in this context a modern-day fanatical enthusiast of Napoleon who spends his energies attempting to build a machine so that he might go back in time to the Battle of Waterloo. He might describe his intentions as either, (a) to alter the past in such a way that Napoleon won the battle, or (b) to play his part in Napoleon's winning (no alteration/change) and perhaps discover how it is that the conspiracy of historians started.

If our fanatic thinks along line (a), we may perhaps back him into a corner where a confusion is revealed: we may ask him, 'Why are you building this machine?', and he may reply, 'Because Napoleon lost and I want to go back and change that'. To this we may say, 'Ah, so you don't believe that Napoleon actually lost'. He may well reply, 'Yes I do; if I didn't, I wouldn't bother building the machine. It's precisely because I'm convinced that he lost that I'm as motivated as I am to build the machine so that I can go back and change that, making it the case that he won after all.' But we may insist, 'Yes, but if you really do believe he actually lost, you can't believe that you're actually going to be successful in your aim of enabling him to have actually won, so believing that he actually lost should demotivate you from building your machine; you can't try to do that which you know you can't succeed in doing.' 'Shut up and let me build', he might reply, revealing that if there is a confusion inherent in this fanatic's intentions, it is one that is not obvious to him; if there is an impossibility in his being successful in his aim, it is one of which he is ignorant. One can certainly be ignorant about non-obvious confusions and metaphysical impossibilities and in one's ignorance try to do things that are impossible as a result of them. Thus, as already said, such a person shows Lewis's first claim to be false.[7]

If our fanatic thinks along line (b), we may ask him, 'Why are you building this machine?', and he may reply, 'Because my hope is that 200 years ago I played a part in securing Napoleon victory at Waterloo, a victory that a conspiracy of historians has since prevented our knowing about.' To this we may say, 'Ah, so you don't believe that Napoleon actually lost.' But he may well reply to this, 'I do believe that Napoleon actually lost, indeed I'd say I knew that he actually lost, but there's still a chance that I'm wrong in that belief and it's the hope that I am indeed wrong that drives me on to build my machine.' 'So you believe he actually lost, yet you believe that there's a chance that he won and thus there's a chance that you're actually going to be successful in your aim of enabling him to have really won and thus bring it about that your belief that he lost is wrong. You hope you're going to be able to cause that which you currently take to be knowledge not to be knowledge after all.' 'That's right. Shut up and let me build.'

Whichever conversational road our imaginary interlocutor travels down – (a) or (b) – without doing violence to his psychology we cannot but say that, (1) he believes that Napoleon actually lost the Battle of Waterloo, and (2) he now wants to do something to make it the case that Napoleon won. Furthermore, if we sweep aside infallibilism, we may posit that he satisfies the conditions for his belief that Napoleon actually lost to count as knowledge and even that he knows that he satisfies these conditions. I cannot see any significant difference between our would-be time-machine-building fanatic and a fanatic who fervently prays each morning that Napoleon won. They may both be confused, irrational, and willing that which is metaphysically impossible, but they are both quite psychologically possible, i.e. there is nothing common to human psychology which allows us to conclude that such people cannot exist. So it is that I return to the conclusion that Lewis is wrong in his first claim. It is quite psychologically possible to pray that something which one knows has obtained in the past not have obtained. This is because for a wishful thought or a prayer for an outcome to be psychologically possible, it need not be logically or metaphysically possible for that wish to come true or the prayer be answered in the way one would wish. It may yet be then, as Lewis would also maintain it is, absurd or a sin to do this thing that is psychologically possible (perhaps because it is impossible in some way for one's prayer to be answered), but if it would be absurd or a sin to do it, this absurdity or sinfulness doesn't make it any less possible to do it. In fact, going down line (b) to explain why one is doing it, it doesn't seem at all absurd or, of necessity, sinful on a Lewisian eternalism either; thus it might be rational. Let's look more closely then at Lewis's second claim to see why.

Lewis's second claim is that, even if we are able to pray that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo at this date in a world such as ours where we know that he actually lost it, it is a sin to do so, a sin against the duty of submitting oneself to God's known will. But this sort of sin doesn't seem inherent to the notion of praying that a known outcome not obtain. With regard to the sin issue: we might

consider Jesus praying, 'Let this cup of suffering pass from me', even though he knew by that stage that it was not going to do so. Did he sin against the duty of submitting himself to God's known will? He did not, for he added 'Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt'. Of course Jesus' prayer was a future-directed prayer, but a past-directed one, 'Let things in the past have been such that of natural necessity this cup of suffering will now pass from me', would seem to have been quite reasonable even on theistic assumptions. So our fanatic may remain pious as long as his prayer is of the form 'Let Napoleon have won at Waterloo. Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.' Someone might insist that it must be the case that this fanatic doesn't really believe that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo, but we have already seen what the fanatic might say to this; our fanatic might be travelling down road (b), believing that in the actual world Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo, but, because he knows that it's not a necessary truth that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo, also believing that there's at least one logically possible world (in fact of course there's an infinite number of such worlds) in which he didn't lose it, yet there was the sort of conspiracy amongst historians that would be sufficient for this fanatic's counterpart in that world to believe that he did lose it. The fanatic does not believe that he is actually in that world (one of those worlds), of course; he does believe that Napoleon lost. But he cannot be certain that he is not in that world (one of those worlds), so he is asking God 'before all worlds' to make the belief that he has that he's not in that world (one of those worlds) false, to make it the case that the actual world is other than he supposes it to be, indeed would claim he knows it to be. The God of the sort pictured by Lewis has 'before all worlds' an aversion *ceteris paribus* to actualizing worlds in which people don't get what they pray for, and so by praying for Napoleon not to have lost the Battle of Waterloo, one gives Him a reason 'before all worlds' not to actualize the world in which Napoleon loses and yet one prays this. If the opportunity costs of this prayer were negligible and it were reasonable to think that Napoleon's winning would be a very great good (it would have to be good enough to outweigh the bad of the conspiracy of historians *et al.*), one could then reasonably pray that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo.

The fanatic might echo Rumsfeld: 'The reports that we have that say that something, in this case Napoleon's victory at Waterloo, hasn't happened interest me, because I would say that I know as a result of them that Napoleon did indeed lose, even perhaps that I know that I know this. But I would also admit that I might be wrong about all that. It's possible that I live in a world where Napoleon won and there's since been an enormous conspiracy amongst historians to make people believe that Wellington won. All the evidence of course suggests to me that the actual world isn't one of those logically possible worlds where Napoleon won, and yet I believe 200 years later that he didn't. But it is nevertheless still logically possible that the actual world is one of these worlds and, personally, I hope that it is one of these worlds; I don't believe that it is, but I hope that it is. Hoping as I do

and noting as a matter of Lewisian theology that an atemporal God shapes the cosmos from ''before all worlds'' in part so that people's prayers are answered in the ways that they wish, I thus pray now that Napoleon won in 1815. In doing so, I reasonably believe myself to be doing my bit to contribute to his much-disbelieved-in victory, *if* (*and only if*) *victory it was*, whilst also reasonably believing, indeed I would say knowing, that victory it wasn't. Still: it's worth a try.' And of course we may posit that he satisfies the conditions for knowing in the actual world that Napoleon lost, so that when he claims knowledge of this fact, he speaks truly. It's thus not too late to take part in the Napoleonic Wars on what one knows to be the losing side.

Contra this line of thinking, one might point out that surely God also has, *ceteris paribus*, reason – we may suppose – not to create worlds in which creatures have apparent memories which are really false memories; friends who are liars or perhaps don't even exist; or are in some other way the victim of systematic deception, for example, by 200 years' worth of historians. If so, we know both that God will have – before all worlds – a preference for actualizing worlds where there is a happy harmony between the prayerfully expressed wishes of His creatures (regardless of the time at which they are expressed relative to the time of the events to which they pertain) and worlds where there are not systematic deceptions of the magnitude that would need to have occurred were certain prayers uttered at certain times to be answered as their utterers would wish, e.g. a prayer that Napoleon won at Waterloo uttered some 200 years after he is well known to have lost. Which of these reasons may we predict God will find winning out? Presumably, we may expect that to vary case by case; only on the assumption that the former good could never win out could we conclude that it could never be rational to pray that an outcome one knows not to have obtained has, after all, obtained and this is an assumption I can see no good reason to make.

Let us consider another example, in which, it seems to me, it is reasonable to suppose the first good wins out, before looking again at our primary example, the Battle of Waterloo, in which, it seems to me (not a Napoleon fanatic), it is reasonable to suppose the second good wins out. (The second good's winning out in the primary example would show that whilst the general point stands – it can be rational to pray for outcomes that one knows not to have obtained – the example of praying that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo does not illustrate this point.)

Suppose that one has just witnessed some tragic road accident in which one's best friend has been killed. I take it that at that moment one satisfies the conditions for knowing that one's friend has died. In shock, as one stands by the kerbside, one closes one's eyes and prays, 'God, let this not have happened; let this all have been just a vivid hallucination.' ('I just keep praying that I'll wake up' is not in fact an uncommon reaction amongst people when first presented with such tragedies.) My claim would be that this reaction is not just psychologically

understandable, but quite probably rational on theism: one's life (and the world in general) would have gone better had this tragedy not befallen one's friend but rather had one been subject to a vivid hallucination. That this would be so in the case of my main example, that of the Battle of Waterloo is at best, I must concede, far less clear. One would have to suppose that Napoleon's victory would have been a very great good indeed for it to be better for one (or the world in general) had he actually won and yet a conspiracy of historians succeeded in hushing it up for 200 years; and it is very difficult to see how this could be, in part precisely because surely a victory of which hardly anyone knows for 200 years at least cannot be a very significant event. So whilst we should still give a positive answer to the last of our questions: 'Could it be rational to pray for outcomes one knows not to have obtained?', we should probably give a negative answer to the question of whether it could be rational to pray for Napoleon to have won at Waterloo (and not just for the historical reason that it would have in itself been bad had he won).

Nothing in this paper then is meant to suggest that knowing that one might be mistaken in a knowledge-claim that Wellington won at Waterloo is sufficient for it to be reasonable for one to pray that Napoleon won; Napoleon's winning (and the least bad conspiracy that would lead to one nevertheless believing as one does that he lost these 200 years later) has to be reasonably believed to be a better state of affairs than Wellington's winning and the opportunity cost of praying for Napoleon's victory has to be low enough. Just as, on the Lewisian eternalism which we have been presupposing, God has a *ceteris paribus* reason to create worlds in which there is a match between the prayerfully expressed wishes of His creatures and the world, so He has a *ceteris paribus* reason to create worlds in which His creatures are not subject to large-scale deception. This last is a factor which makes it less reasonable to pray for an outcome which one knows not to have obtained in proportion to the strength of the evidence one has that it has obtained, for in collecting evidence that it has obtained, one is collecting evidence that were one's prayer to be answered in the way that one wishes, God would have to do that which one can take it He has reason not to do, have actualized a world where there was – to the extent of one's evidence – deception. In the case of my main example, the Battle of Waterloo, I concede that I cannot myself see how this could be done. We just do know too much about history to participate rationally in the Napoleonic Wars on the losing side. In the case of my secondary example, where one has just witnessed one's best friend being tragically killed in a road accident, and the deception needed would just be some relatively short-lived hallucination, I can see how it could be done. With regard to the Battle of Waterloo, the only rational prayer to utter can be that Wellington won it. With regard to the sudden death of one's friend, a rational reaction – indeed perhaps the only rational reaction on theism – can be to utter the prayer that he or she not, after all, have died.

Of course against the rationality of actually uttering any prayer, one may point out that there are activities other than prayer with which one might profitably occupy oneself and praying may detract from the time and energies one has for these other activities. As praying for outcomes one knows have not obtained is praying for things one knows God has not (from eternity) granted, so one might say that in any case where one is considering whether or not to pray for an outcome one knows not to have obtained, one has the resources to know that one's time and energy would be better deployed elsewhere and thus to know it would be irrational to pray for that outcome. The opportunity costs are always too high. However, this seems too strong a claim. Surely one can often pray whilst (and without slowing one down in) doing something else which one would have to do anyway (e.g. walking to work); and one can often expend no extra energy by doing so, as one's prayer merely displaces from one's mind another equally energetic mental activity which one may equally know to be worthless (e.g. reflecting on the contents of the soap opera one watched on the television the previous evening), and thus this reason not to pray for an outcome one knows not to have obtained is removed. In cases where one has no reason to suppose that the level of deception required would be a sufficient bad for it to outweigh the good of the outcome which one knows not to have obtained, then the remaining obstacle to praying rationally for an outcome one knows not to have obtained is removed. This may not be removed in the case of prayers about the Battle of Waterloo, but it may be in the case of other more recent and less historically studied events, events which one nevertheless knows not to have obtained.

In any case, on a Lewisian eternalism, events which were very good and which one knows to have obtained, should – whenever the opportunity cost is negligible – form a focus for our prayers. Believing in the worth of Wellington's victory as I do, I close by calling upon you, if you have no other more pressing business to which you should attend as you finish this paper and transfer your attentions to your next activity, to join me in a short prayer for the Duke of Wellington's success in what we have every reason to believe was, in Wellington's words, 'the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life'. We also of course have every reason to expect that our prayers will be answered in the manner that we would wish, indeed they've already been so answered – Wellington did win – and so to thank God for that. Amen.[8]

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1959), 214.
2. One might even suggest that we have evidence of this. See L. Leibovici 'Effects of remote, retroactive intercessory prayer on outcomes in patients with bloodstream infection: randomised controlled trial', *British Medical Journal*, **323** (2001), the conclusion of which is, 'Remote, retroactive intercessory prayer said for a group is associated with a shorter stay in hospital and shorter duration of fever in patients with a bloodstream infection and should be considered for use in clinical

practice.'; http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/full/323/7327/1450, accessed 8 October 2005. I am grateful to Dan Griffin for drawing my attention to the fact that Lewis himself considers the possibility of an experiment such as this in his essay 'The efficacy of prayer', which is reprinted in L. Walmsley (ed.) *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), where he says, on 238–239, 'I have seen it suggested that a team of people – the more the better – should agree to pray as hard as they knew how, over a period of six weeks, for all the patients in Hospital A and none of those in Hospital B. Then you would tot up the results and see if A had more cures and fewer deaths. And I suppose you would repeat the experiment at various times and places so as to eliminate the influence of irrelevant factors. The trouble is that I do not see how any real prayer could go on under such conditions. "Words without thoughts never to heaven go", says the King in *Hamlet*. Simply to say prayers is not to pray: otherwise a team of properly trained parrots would serve as men for our experiment. You cannot pray for the recovery of the sick unless the end you have in view is their recovery. But you can have no motive for desiring the recovery of all the patients in one hospital and none of those in another. You are not doing it in order that suffering should be relieved; you are doing it to find out what happens. The real purpose and nominal purposes of your prayers are at variance. In other words, whatever your tongue and cheek and knees may do, you are not praying. The experiment demands an impossibility.'

This worry seems misguided for a number of reasons. Firstly, one can have dual purposes in one's actions without them being 'at variance' in a way that means that one is cancelled out by the other, or one's will is in some problematic way divided against itself. A doctor might be conventionally treating the patients in Hospital A with the aim of maximizing cures and minimizing deaths in that hospital and also the aim of getting this hospital a better reputation than the neighbouring Hospital B; the former motivation is perhaps more laudable than the second, but his having the second in addition does not prevent his having the first. Similarly, those praying for the patients in Hospital A might have the motivation of maximizing cures and minimizing deaths in Hospital A and also the aim of supplying interesting information for a researcher on the efficacy of prayer, hoping – let us suppose – that it will be shown to be efficacious and thus indirectly hoping that people will do less well in Hospital B. That they have these later hopes does not, it seems to me, prevent them having the former, genuine, desire for the health and wellbeing of people in Hospital A. In any case, the experiment could be conducted so that those praying for people in Hospital A don't have any thoughts at all about Hospital B. Indeed it seems best – to prevent them inadvertently sending a prayer in that direction too – if the researcher doesn't tell them about this 'control' hospital and perhaps doesn't tell them that the results of their prayers (or lack thereof) are going to be used by him or her in research of any sort at all. In such circumstances it seems that those praying for the patients in Hospital A need not have any second motive that might, even in principle, be 'at variance' with the first. Further, it seems to me an open question – to be decided on empirical grounds – whether trained parrots *are* as efficacious as vicars, let us say, in persuading God to produce the effects that sentences spoken by them would be non-problematically taken by a competent language user as asking for when spoken by a person. I can't help but think – as Lewis thought – that they wouldn't be; that God would be more likely to choose to respond to vicars who know what they're asking for, rather than parrots who are just making the sounds that often accompany asking for things; that words without thoughts never to Heaven go – but it seems to me that evidence could stack up suggesting that Lewis and I are mistaken in this assumption. Thus an interesting experiment involving trained parrots on the one hand and vicars on the other suggests itself as something Leibovici might profitably conduct next; its results would have consequences for the rationality of diverting funds from theological training colleges to parrot-training schools and parrot-staffed chantries.

3. Kevin Timpe 'Prayers for the past', *Religious Studies*, **41** (2005), 305–322.
4. In fact it seems to me that all the generic worries may be dissipated by careful exposition of the position. See Geoffrey Brown 'Praying about the past', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, **35** (1985), 83–85, for example, for a refutation of Geach's criticisms of Lewis's account as given in his *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), ch. 7.
5. Eleonore Stump *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003, 505 n. 78) quoted (and agreed with) by Kevin Timpe in Timpe, 'Prayers for the past', 318.
6. Lewis *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, 214–215.
7. Personally, I incline to think that line (a) is not coherent, but G. C. Goddu in 'Time travel and changing the past (or how to kill yourself and live to tell the tale)', *Ratio*, **16** (2003), 16–32, makes a powerful case

that the usual arguments for thinking this may be circumvented, albeit only by the positing of what he calls 'hypertime' in addition to ordinary time.

8. I am grateful to Steve Lovell for drawing my attention to Lewis's thoughts on this matter as an object of philosophical interest; for the comments of Kevin Timpe on an earlier draft of this paper; for the comments of an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* on a later draft; and for the comments and direction of the Editor.