

## *Reviews*

Scott A. Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 189+ pp.

‘Assuming that the God of traditional theism exists, is it reasonable to think that God answers specific prayers?’ (5) This is the question at the heart of Davison’s investigation. But in offering a response, Davison gives a much more interesting answer than a simple “yes” or “no”. The fact is that such a consideration of prayer throws up all sorts of other issues that are (in my view) probably more important ultimately than the initial question itself, and which have all sorts of practical relevance. A number of times Davison refers to C.S. Lewis’ little book *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* and the attractive humility of Lewis’ approach to the subject is mirrored in Davison’s equally humble and unassuming manner. Several times, for example, he laments that he might be taken to mean that he intends his work ‘to inform anyone’s personal decisions concerning whether or not to pray in the petitionary way’ (170). Protest as he might, it seems to me that the value of such a work is to give us clarity as to the *practical* implications of petitionary prayer and other sorts of communication with the divine. And, even though this is a work of analytic philosophy, it must be said in praise of Davison’s approach that it is not an attempt to colonise the subject area of prayer in the name of that discipline. Davison is cautious about his expertise and knowledge of theology and he does not assume that his arguments amount to some kind of final statement. Conversely, I must say that my field of study *is* theology and that I venture into the territory of analytic philosophy warily, with fear and trembling.

To summarise this book is tricky because it is a highly focussed précis of the philosophical conversation on petitionary prayer. Therefore, skipping over various laudatory features I could discuss, I will merely observe that this book is about ‘the puzzles and questions surrounding petitionary prayer’ (5). The puzzles are various<sup>1</sup> but I think they break down into two broad questions: firstly, does it make sense to believe that God answers petitionary prayers? And, secondly, could we ever know that he does so?

The first question can be teased out by asking further, ‘Are there ‘plausible candidates for something “significant enough to be worth foregoing the (lesser) good of the provision being made without the request”?’ (Quoting Murray and Meyers, 1994, p. 131) In other words, why would God *need* petitionary prayers to be offered to him? Why would he not simply provide the good things that might be prayed for rather than wait until people offered prayer for them? Is it not morally reprehensible of God, for example, to *not* heal a child of cancer unless or until somebody prays for his healing? If not, then petitionary prayer must be an extremely significant good to justify such a requirement. Davison, in his candour, comments thus in his introduction:

The original title of this book was “On the Pointlessness of Petitionary Prayer,” and the main conclusion I had planned to defend was that the philosophical arguments showed that almost no petitionary prayers could influence God’s action in the world. But as my study of the arguments progressed, and new ways of understanding how things might work became clear to me, I discovered that I simply could not defend this conclusion philosophically...in the end, my conclusion is best described as lying in between the view that all petitionary prayer is pointless and the view that none of it is (3).

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most interesting to my mind is Davison’s exploration of Lewis’ observation that Christ’s teaching on prayer seems to fall into two mutually-contradictory categories: the first, as modelled by Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed, “Thy will be done,” (Matt. 26.39), the second when he teaches that God will bring about a request if the believer truly believes that he will do so. In Matthew 21:21, Christ states, for example, “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” But how is the sort of faith possible if there must always be a doubt in the mind as to whether or not the object of one’s prayer is God’s will? cf. pp. 82-23.

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Examples of types of petitionary prayer that are clearly not pointless are, for example, those that are offered for oneself for ‘permission-required, direct divine goods’ (165). These are the sorts of prayers that one makes for oneself that give God permission, as it were, to bring about something directly that will contribute to one’s relationship with him. The decision to pray or not provides, in the words of Eleonore Stump, the possibility of “autonomy” for the person in his or her relation to God. In other words, true friendship cannot be forced upon a person but must be requested, and the acceptance of this request must be freely given. This type of petitionary prayer works for prayers on behalf of oneself but not to others for the obvious reason that it would override *their* autonomous decisions to grant God permission to do a particular thing: “I pray that my friend John would freely give You permission to love him” is clearly an absurd thing to pray, for example. Other types of petitionary prayer that are not pointless are those which Davison defines as ‘cases in which there are other goods at stake that are significant enough to be worth forgoing the provision of something in the absence of a petitionary prayer requesting it’ (164). But he is ultimately ambivalent about what these might be without denying the possibility of their existence (166).

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the question of whether or not we could know if God has ever answered our petitionary prayers by giving us specifically what we asked for. After a consideration of the literature, he concludes on this score:

In the typical cases in which traditional theists believe that their petitionary prayers have been answered, there is no convincing evidence that something miraculous has occurred, no good reason to think that the event in question would not have happened if no petitionary prayers had been offered, and most importantly, no way to discern what role petitionary prayer might have played in God’s decisions (and hence no way to tell whether or not a given event is an answer to prayer) (87).

Davison says these things because in every situation he envisages of ostensibly answered prayer there are always other possible explanations that are equally or more likely to be true: for example, the circumstances which could be counted as answered prayer might have come about for any number of reasons independent

of petitionary prayer *or* some other person or persons might have been praying for the same things and God's answer might have been to *their* prayers instead.

I cannot do justice to the nuance and scope of Davison's arguments for these various conclusions here but I hope that the above gives a general idea of where he ends up. To see how he gets there, one really must read the book and follow his close engagement with the literature. In the remainder of my time, I would like to raise a few points about Davison's project in general from a more continental perspective. When I use the word 'continental', I do not mean to sound dismissive of the analytic tradition of philosophy, which I hold in the highest esteem, or to imply that I believe that continental philosophy elides unambiguously with theology. But given the nature of this particular journal, it seems the most interesting thing to raise certain questions not simply about the intricacies of Davison's argument but of the presuppositions he might bring to the project from his analytic perspective that could perhaps be critiqued from an alternative viewpoint.

To begin with, it is worth asking why *at all* it is valuable to approach this project in this way. Isn't prayer an experiential activity that one understands by participating in it? Isn't its very nature incomprehensible to those who would stand outside and analyse? More than that, is it not the case that, if this is the kind of universe in which prayer is valid, that it would be necessarily impenetrable to those who refuse to humble themselves and actually do it (not that I am accusing Davison of that)? Indeed, Davison's initial question—'Assuming that the God of traditional theism exists, is it reasonable to think that God answers specific prayers?'(5)—seems to imply something of this sort. A simple answer to the question from a Christian perspective (I am not qualified to answer from any other) would be "yes". And the reason would be that God has commanded it in the person of Christ and in the New Testament in various ways, and that the Church has embodied in its traditions. So it *must* be reasonable. And where, from a limited and created perspective we cannot have access to these reasons, it has no bearing on whether or not we are justified in believing in its reasonability. But I suspect Davison would admit as much and would appeal to the limited nature of his study.

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Bearing that in mind, the following may be an example of where a certain commitment to the principles of analytic philosophy may lead to a disagreement. In his discussion of the epistemological possibility of knowing that a specific prayer has been answered by God, Davison gives a thorough consideration of what might be considered sufficient grounds for this type of knowledge. In the course of his discussion, he gives the example of a man called Bill who 'sends a letter to a company recommending an improvement in one of its products but receives no reply to his letter' (67). Then, a year later, he notices that the improvement he recommended has indeed come about, but he does not know if it was in response to his letter or not. If Bill believes that the company did it in response to his letter and it turns out to be true that they did then, Davison argues, his belief was not really knowledge but constitutes 'a lucky guess' (68). He goes on:

The most reasonable thing for Bill to do here would be to withhold belief on the question of whether or not the change in the product was due to his suggestion. [This case supports] the general principle that if a person cannot distinguish which of two (or more) possible and incompatible explanations of the occurrence of some event E is operative, then S does not know that one of the explanations is operative, even if S believes this and it is true (68).

Applied to petitionary prayer, this principle presents us with quite a serious problem because (as mentioned above) we can never rule out the possibility that there are other explanations for why our prayers are answered: other people could have been praying for the same things or God could have intended to bring them about anyway.

Later on, he gives an example of a situation of this type. Suppose my friend has cancer and has a small chance of recovery, but she recovers spontaneously after petitionary prayers are offered for her. Davison appears to reject the possibility that she might know that God has healed her because people sometimes recover with no medical explanation and we could never be in a position to know God's specific reasons for bringing about such a recovery anyway (79-80).

But why do we need to rule out these alternatives before we can believe with justification that our prayers are answered? In response Davison writes,

In a context such as the one in this book [...] in which we are involved in a philosophical discussion that is determined to consider all possibilities, the threshold for counting something as a case of knowledge is surely high (94).

This is fair enough but, outside of the context of analytic philosophy, in the realm of prayers really offered and possibly answered, then surely the threshold for knowledge is much lower. It clearly serves a beneficial purpose to have such a high threshold for knowledge in order to help us think carefully about the issues involved (and so that we are not susceptible to the spurious claims of clammy-handed televangelists in shiny white suits). But ultimately if one really believes that God exists and that he providentially orders creation and that he has directed us to pray for specific things to happen, one is perfectly reasonable in believing that God has answered one's prayer when one prays for something particular to happen and it happens, particularly when it is something like the disappearance of an inoperable tumour or something of this sort. The issue, it seems to me, is not whether or not God answers petitionary prayer, but whether or not God exists *at all*. C. S. Lewis, in discussing the problem raised by Davison, dismisses the challenge by saying that one cannot know even if a friend has done something in response to one's request because that friend could always have done it for another reason: he may have been intending to anyway, or someone else might have asked him. That being so, surely one is still reasonable to believe that he did it because you asked him. Why not the same approach to God (if he exists, that is)?

I suspect that the type of petitionary prayer that Davison is particularly interested in exploring—that is, prayers directed outwards from oneself into the world for particular things—are impossible. Rather than series of punctiliar ejaculations, it is probably better to think of prayer as a continuous stream in which one swims for a time, or, to use a biblical image, as sweet-smelling incense—*ταῖς προσευχαῖς τῶν ἁγίων* (the prayers of the saints)—which rises (as one) before God's throne in heaven before he answers and acts (Rev. 8:4). In the

biopic *Shadowlands*, Anthony Hopkins utters C. S. Lewis' dictum on petitionary prayer: "It doesn't change God; it changes me." And I think that something of this sort is probably true. The fact that prayer changes the pray-er does not mean, however, that God does not answer petitionary prayer by changing the world: the change may occur providentially in all the billions of people in the world who offer prayer and become themselves answers to it in manifold ways of which they might not be aware. How else God might change the world in response to prayer, I am not precisely sure, but I believe that he does. Admittedly this is more of an intuition than an argument.

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