

Aquinas and Gregory the Great on the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer

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Abstract

I defend a solution to the puzzle of petitionary prayer based on some ideas of Aquinas, Gregory the Great, and contemporary desert theorists. I then address a series of objections. Along the way broader issues about the nature of desert, what is required for an action to have a point, and what is required for a puzzle to have a solution are discussed.

1 The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer

Suppose you pray for rain. If it is best for it to rain, God will make it happen even without your prayer. If it is not, God will keep it from raining even if you pray. Either way it doesn't change what God will do. This makes your prayer seem pointless.

2 A Desertist Solution

Aquinas, quoting Gregory the Great, writes¹:

[W]e pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but...
“that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God
from eternity has disposed to give.”

This suggests a principle linking asking to desert:

AD: If S asks for x from y , then S deserves to get x from y in virtue of asking.

AD is problematic. There are cases in which someone asks for something but fails to deserve it. Suppose you purchase a beer and a stranger asks out of the blue if he can have it. Or suppose a student turns in a bad paper and asks for an A. The stranger and student do not deserve what they asked for. There are

¹Sum II-II, Q. 83.

also cases in which someone asks for something and deserves what was asked for but not in virtue of asking. Suppose you spill a stranger's beer and he asks you to replace it. Or suppose another student, who turned in a good paper, asks for an A. The stranger deserves a beer from you and the student deserves an A. But not in virtue of asking.

Desert theorists hold that fully articulated desert statements include information about the strength of desert². In the cases above, the subjects deserve what they asked for to only a minuscule degree in virtue of asking. The stranger who asks for your beer out of the blue and the student who wrote a bad paper but asks for an A deserve what they asked for but only to a very small degree. The stranger whose beer you spill and the student who writes a very good paper already deserve what they asked for in virtue of other things. But asking contributes a minuscule amount to the degree to which they deserve the relevant goods.

Let's introduce a Rossian distinction between overall desert and prima facie desert. The stranger who asks for your beer and the student who wrote a bad paper do not overall deserve what they asked for. But they have a minuscule amount of prima facie desert for what they asked for. The stranger whose beer you spilled and the student who wrote a good paper overall deserve what they ask for independently of asking. But asking adds a minuscule amount of prima facie desert for what they ask for. Also, asking in an insincere, insulting, ungrateful, or demanding way is not a basis for desert. Consider:

AD*: If S asks for x from y in a respectful, grateful, appreciative, and non-demanding way, then S prima facie deserves to get x to a minuscule degree from y in virtue of asking.

Desert theorists accept³:

World: A world at which S receives and overall deserves x is better than an otherwise similar world at which S receives but does not overall deserve x .

Let's say that S overall deserves x from y *partly in virtue of* F if and only if three conditions obtain. First, S overall deserves x from y . Second, S prima facie deserves x from y in virtue of F . Third, if S did not prima facie deserve x from y in virtue of F , then S would not overall deserve x from y . Consider:

Petition: A non-trivial number of petitionary prayers are such that the praying subject overall deserves what God has already decided to give that subject partly in virtue of asking.

Given AD*, petitionary prayers make a minuscule contribution to prima facie desert. So given God's providence, we may suppose that Petition is true and on a non-trivial number of occasions we overall deserve what God will give us partly in virtue of offering petitionary prayers. Given World, receiving from God what we overall deserve is better than receiving from God what we merely prima facie deserve. So petitionary prayers are not pointless.

²See Feldman (2016) and McLeod (2013).

³See Ross (1930, p. 138), Brandt (1961, p. 123), Feldman (2004, pp. 194-7), and Skow (2012, pp. 235-6).

3 Objections and Replies

First Objection: If only a non-trivial number of prayers generate overall desert, then the remaining prayers will be pointless.

Reply: An action can have a point even if the point of the action remains unfulfilled. Suppose you have a hedon generating machine. Sometimes pressing the button on the machine will give your friend a hedon. Other times pressing the button will do nothing. Suppose it generates a hedon 4 out of every 10 times it is activated. Now imagine that you press the button on the machine and it does nothing. Your action was not pointless. The point of pressing the button was to give your friend a hedon. You never know when the machine will generate a hedon and when it will do nothing. So it makes sense to activate it even in cases in which, unbeknownst to you, the machine will do nothing. We are often in the dark about our level of desert⁴. Given Petition, it makes sense to offer petitionary prayers just as it makes sense to press the button on the hedon generating machine.

Second Objection: One can generate overall desert without offering petitionary prayers.

Reply: An action is not pointless merely in virtue of the fact that it achieves a good that could have been achieved in some other way. Suppose I can save your life by pressing either Button A or Button B. Suppose I press Button B. My action was not pointless. The point was to save your life. It does not matter that I could have saved you by pressing a different button. Similarly, there are many ways to achieve the receipt of overall deserved goods. But praying is one way to achieve it. The fact that we could have achieved the relevant good in other ways does not make it any more pointless than the fact that I could have saved your life by pressing Button A makes pressing Button B pointless.

Third Objection: Suppose an evil person asks for forgiveness. She is so far from overall deserving forgiveness that asking does not generate desert. Nevertheless, her prayer has a point.

Reply: An action can have a point even if other instances of that action have a different point. The point of her prayer is not to generate overall desert. But an alternative point is easy to find. Repentance is good. Praying for forgiveness is one way to begin to repent. That is why it makes sense for the evil person to pray for forgiveness even though she will not overall deserve it after praying. Different petitionary prayers have different points. The fact that the point of some prayers is to begin to achieve repentance rather than to generate overall desert is a virtue of the solution and not a demerit.

Fourth Objection: Asking does not improve things for the praying subject. God will give them the relevant good whether they ask or not.

Reply: An action can have a point even if that action is of no benefit to subject performing the action. Suppose someone gives a large amount of money to UNICEF. Making such a large donation causes this person so much hardship that her life is overall worse. But her action was not pointless.

⁴See Feldman (1995).

Fifth Objection: People pray in order to bring about the outcome they desire. If they were to discover that the purpose of petitionary prayer is to aid in their achievement of overall desert they would stop praying.

Reply: An action can have a point even if the agent of that action would not have performed it if they had known its point. We started out with the worry that petitionary prayer is pointless. If I am told that I have sketched a way in which such prayer can have a point, but that upon discovering its point people would stop praying, then I will say that I have nevertheless done my job. For people do not believe my sketch. They continue to pray. And in doing so they contribute to the value of the world. Furthermore, it is not clear that people would stop praying if they discovered that one of the purposes of petitionary prayer is to achieve overall desert. This is something Aquinas and Gregory the Great believed. But nevertheless they offered such prayers.

Sixth Objection: Petition is false. It would require an extraordinary coincidence for history to line up in such a way that Petition is true. In light of this, it is hard to see how petitionary prayer makes much of a difference in typical cases. It would only make a difference on the rarest of occasions and so typically be pointless.

Reply: Petition does not require a coincidence. Consider the Calvin/Aquinas view that every contingent proposition gets its truth-value by divine decree. So God can decree that free creatures pray at exactly the times required to make Petition true. Consider Molinism. There are infinitely many worlds God could create. It is plausible that at some of these worlds there will be strange and unusual patterns that add to the value of the world. In some cases the unusual patterns will cause petitionary prayers to generate desert with non-trivial frequency. Equipped with knowledge of counterfactuals about indeterministic processes such as free decisions and quantum phenomena, God knows how He needs to set up the initial conditions of the world and/or when He needs to intervene in order to make Petition true. Consider Simple Foreknowledge and Open Theism views. On these theories of providence, God might not be able to guarantee that Petition is true. But He can use knowledge of the probabilities of free decisions and quantum phenomena to ensure that Petition is probably true. In this way God can ensure that prayers do make a difference in many typical cases.

Seventh Objection: What needs defense is the claim that the kind of prayers encouraged by a given religious tradition (with their prescribed frequency and objects) have a point. Focusing too literally on “having a point” allows for a kind of solution, but one that might not address the real problem.

Reply: It is important to look at things from God’s perspective. Regarding getting the right frequency of prayers: Pick any frequency of prayers that any religious tradition takes to have a point. God can meticulously arrange history, in the way I outline in reply to the previous objection about Petition, so that such prayers generate overall desert often enough that such prayers have a point. Regarding getting the right objects of prayer: Some legitimate objects of prayer will likely not be included in my solution such as the prayer discussed in reply to objection three by the person undeserving of forgiveness, as well as non-

petitionary prayers of thanks for what God has done or celebrations of God's excellence. But as I suggested above, it is a virtue of my solution that it does not entail that there is only one point to petitionary prayers and that different prayers have different points.

Eighth Objection: My solution does not generate the right frequency of prayers. Either the potential value of praying is so great that you should always be praying, as opposed to doing anything else, or it is so low that you should rarely do it.

Reply: It is not clear to me why this would be true. First, a world that consisted of nothing but people asking God for things would miss out on the wide variety of other kinds of value that our world is teeming with. That would make such a world much worse than ours. It seems that a better world would have petitionary prayers as one of many valuable activities creatures engage in. Second, we don't think that other activities of great value should be done to the exclusion of everything else. It might be of great value to do research in quantum physics. But no one thinks that is the only activity anyone should be furthering. We think that smiling at one's neighbor may be of only a little value. But it is still worth doing.

Ninth Objection: World is incompatible with Christianity. We did not do anything to deserve forgiveness from God. And the world would not have been better if God had given us forgiveness because we deserved it.

Reply: Desert theorists have shown that one can deserve something without having done anything to deserve it⁵. In the case of Christianity, we deserve forgiveness from God. But not because of what we have done. Instead, it is because of what Christ has done for us. If God were to withhold forgiveness from us, He would be depriving us of something we deserve in virtue of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Tenth Objection: According to my solution, an already deserving petitioner can become more deserving by asking. But such a petitioner has already done all that is needed to become sufficiently deserving. It may not be "pointless" to add some small degree of desert. But it is insignificant.

Reply: The distinction between prima facie and overall desert is analogous to Ross' distinction between prima facie and overall rightness. For Ross, adding a minuscule amount of prima facie rightness might not count for much on its own. But sometimes it tips the balance so that an act becomes overall right. And that is significant. Similarly, merely adding a minuscule amount of prima facie desert may not be significant. But, given Petition, it often pushes subjects over the edge from merely prima facie deserving something to overall deserving it. That is significant.

Eleventh Objection: How is my solution different from Cohoe's (2014)?

Reply: Cohoe (p. 6) argues that the puzzle is really a puzzle for any creaturely action if God exists. I argue that whether God exists or not, reasons sometimes given for thinking petitionary prayer is pointless imply (implausibly) that other actions are pointless. Cohoe (p. 13) argues that there are goods God can

⁵See Feldman (1995).

achieve only through petitionary prayers. I allow that God could have achieved the relevant goods in other ways. Cohoe (p. 24) argues that “if in every case the good brought about as a result of petitionary prayer would have been brought about in some similar manner in any case, one might doubt the efficacy of petitionary prayer” and that (p. 27) “some goods are counterfactually dependent on prayer.” I allow that petitionary prayer has a point even if God would always bring about the relevant goods anyway. Cohoe’s solution is articulated within Aquinas’ framework and adopts Aquinas’ views about value, causation, God’s power, and other metaphysical issues. My solution does not depend on any particular theological or metaphysical position. It is compatible with any theory of God’s providence and relies on common assumptions shared by desert theorists. In short, Cohoe’s solution depends on many plausible but controversial assumptions. My solution depends on only one controversial assumption-AD*. Every other feature of the solution is built out of widely shared theological and moral assumptions.

Twelfth Objection: According to Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010):

[W]e cannot petition him while thinking that our words won’t make any difference to whether he does what we ask. That’s because, in general, our words do not constitute the speech act of petitioning if we think that our words won’t make any difference to whether the petitioned does what we ask. Therefore, no matter what words we use, and even if they would typically be used to perform a speech act of petitioning, they do not constitute an act of petitioning God if we think that they won’t make any difference to what God does. It behooves us, therefore, not to accept [that prayers do not change what God will do] if we wish to engage in the practice of petitionary prayer.

Reply: Consider two questions. First, there is the question of whether the common activity of petitionary prayer is correctly classified as a petition. Second, there is the question of whether the common activity of petitionary prayer has a point. The first question is certainly interesting. It is worth considering how exactly to classify petitionary prayer and how it relates to typical petitions. But it strikes me that the second question is much more interesting. I am more interested in knowing whether the common activity of petitionary prayer has a point than I am in knowing whether ‘petition’ is a misnomer for that activity. And it is the second question that my solution is intended to answer.

Thirteenth Objection: According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Davidson, 2012):

Aquinas.... seems to deny that petitionary prayers are effective, so it would not solve the problem.

Stump (1979, p. 86) writes:

Why should prayers be included in God’s plan as causes of certain effects? And what sense is there in the notion that a perfect and

unchangeable God, who disposes and plans everything, fulfills men's prayers asking him to do one thing or another? Thomas's argument, I think, gives no help with these questions.

Reply: Petitionary prayers are effective and should be included in God's plan because they generate desert. Aquinas adds⁶ that they generate 'happiness', 'confidence', 'honor' and cause us to 'recognize in Him the Author of our goods'. God fulfills our prayers in the sense that we ask Him for goods and He provides them.

Fourteenth Objection: Most scholars who work on this topic are concerned that petitionary prayer would prove not to be efficacious in terms of adding anything to bringing about what the petitioner prays for. I concede the very position that most solutions try to preserve.

Reply: A solution to a puzzle can contribute to the literature even if it denies something that most other solutions attempt to preserve. Most authors seek to resolve the Sorites Paradox in a way that preserves the assumption that there is no precise cut off between a mere collection of pebbles and a heap. But Williamson (1994), Sorensen (2001), and Rescher (2009) offer solutions that abandon this assumption. Most authors seek to resolve puzzles about omnipotence in a way that preserves God's omnipotence. But Geach (1973), Sobel (2004), Hill (2014), Morrision (2002), and Nagasawa (2008) offer solutions that abandon omnipotence.

Fifteenth Objection: A solution can reject tenets other solutions retain, but how far am I going in suggesting petitionary prayer does not add anything. Do I really want to deny that in some cases the prayer itself adds something to what ends up being brought about?

Reply: It is not that my solution *entails the denial of* the claim that petitionary prayer sometimes contributes to bringing about what is requested. It is instead that my solution *does not rely on* that claim. There is a sharp divide in the literature between those who think it is obvious that prayer could never contribute to bringing about an outcome and those who are convinced that it could. I think it is a virtue of my solution that it is compatible with either view.

Sixteenth Objection: Part of the interest of this paper is supposed to be historical. It would be surprising if desert were an important part of Aquinas' solution since, as we have seen, contemporary critics of Aquinas ignore that aspect of his account. However, I do not offer any serious engagement with Aquinas' texts or thought. Aquinas, for instance, often quotes a variety of authorities only to reject or recast what the authorities say. I have done nothing to show that the desert solution is really the heart of Aquinas' approach to petitionary prayer. The fact that he quotes Gregory the Great on this matter does not alone show that this was the heart of his own views.

Reply: Consider the main passage in which Aquinas' response to the puzzle of petitionary prayer occurs:

In order to throw light on this question we must consider that Divine

⁶Sum II-II, Q. 83

providence disposes not only what effects shall take place, but also from what causes and in what order these effects shall proceed. Now among other causes human acts are the causes of certain effects. Wherefore it must be that men do certain actions not that thereby they may change the Divine disposition, but that by those actions they may achieve certain effects according to the order of the Divine disposition: and the same is to be said of natural causes. And so is it with regard to prayer. For we pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers in other words "that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give," as Gregory says (Dial. i, 8)

Aquinas then goes on to offer short replies to more specific reasons for thinking petitionary prayer is pointless. He adds that such prayer reminds us "of the necessity of having recourse to God's help" and produces "confidence", "happiness", and "honor".

So Aquinas suggests that God wants our prayers to be parts of some of the processes by which He brings about various goods. Aquinas then gives reasons why God might want this to happen. In the main passage in which Aquinas gives his solution, he cites only one reason why God would have this preference-asking generates desert. In briefer responses to other variants of the objection, Aquinas says petitionary prayer achieves various other good things. It is clear that Aquinas is not quoting Gregory the Great to refute him or to set him aside. Generating desert is not the only purpose of petitionary prayer for Aquinas. But it is a central purpose.

I would like to highlight one other issue of historical interest. Compare Aquinas' discussion of petitionary prayer with a similar discussion in the Xunzi. Although he never discusses desert, Xunzi (2001, p. 263) advocates a view that is in broad outline like Aquinas':

One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: There is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. When the sun and moon suffer eclipse, one tries to save them. When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not for the sake of getting what one seeks, but rather to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman looks upon this as proper form, but the common people look upon it as connecting with spirits.

For Xunzi, performing the rain ritual does not change whether Heaven provides rain. But it still has a point. The point is connected to Xunzi's ideas about the cultivation of gentlemen and sages and the utilitarian value of rituals in ordering society. Aquinas suggests that although petitionary prayer does not change what God will do, it still yields various goods including the achievement of desert, as well as the cultivation of confidence, happiness, and honor. Similarly, Xunzi

suggests that the relevant rituals do not change what Heaven will do, but it still cultivates gentlemen, sages, and brings order to society. While differing in the particulars about which goods are achieved through prayer or ritual, the broad strategy is the same. Much of what I've said in reply to objections to Aquinas' approach regarding desert can be extended to Xunzi's approach to the value of ritual.

Seventeenth Objection: Why believe asking generates desert?

Reply: My first argument is that in general effort is a desert base. Asking is one way of exerting effort. So asking is a desert base. The claim that effort generates desert is a common assumption in work on desert and work on distributive justice. As McLeod (2002) puts it:

Suppose we are asked to draw up a list of the bases for desert—that is, a catalogue of the sorts of things such that having any of them would make a subject deserving. What would go on the list, and how would each entry be justified? We might agree that effort, for example, is a basis for deserving reward or success, but we might be less sure about whether need, for instance, is a basis for deserving medical care, or whether moral worth is a basis for deserving happiness.

As Feldman (1992, p. 206) puts it in the context of his account of the morality of abortion:

[T]hose who appeal to an alleged right to life often have a hard time explaining the basis for this right. What justifies the claim that a certain individual has this right...? My view, on the other hand, is based on concepts already familiar from our thought about justice. Other things being equal, if an individual puts more into something, he or she deserves more out of it.

Rawls (1971, p. 104), on the other hand, denies that effort is a desert base:

It seems to be one of the fixed points of our considered moral judgments is that no one deserves his place in the distribution of natural endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematical; for his character depends in large measure upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. The notion of desert seems not to apply in these cases.

Rawls' argument depends on the principle that one has a desert base only if one deserves that desert base. But suppose I spill your beer. You deserve a beer from me in virtue of my having spilled it. But you certainly didn't deserve for me to spill your beer. You can't claim credit for my clumsiness. The credit is mine. So Rawls' principle is false. Furthermore, others have pointed out⁷

⁷See Feldman (2016, pp. 190-5), Sher (1979), and Zaitchik (1977).

that Rawls' principle leads to complete skepticism about desert. It implies that no one deserves anything since whatever anyone deserves may be traced back to either a putative desert base that they can't claim credit for or an infinite regress. So Rawls' argument against the view that effort generates desert is unsound. Effort is a desert base. Petitionary prayer requires effort. Thus, petitionary prayer is a desert base.

My second argument is that the hypothesis that asking generates desert yields a gain in explanatory power. It allows for a simple and elegant solution to the puzzle of petitionary prayer without appealing to any other controversial theological or moral assumptions. If a hypothesis yields a gain in explanatory power, that is a reason to believe it. So one should believe that asking generates desert. The claim that a gain in explanatory power is a reason to believe a hypothesis is a common assumption in metaphysics. Take Lewis' (1986) modal realism, for example. No one has the intuition that there are concrete possible worlds. Indeed, many have the intuition that there are no such worlds. But positing them yields a gain in explanatory power. That is a reason to believe in them. Similarly, a gain in explanatory power is a reason to believe asking generates desert.

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