

A Logical Analysis of Petitionary Prayer on Behalf of Others

PETITIONARY PRAYER ON BEHALF OF OTHERS IS A PROMINENT AND GROWING practice around the world today. I argue that the two main lines of defence of the cogency of this form of petitionary prayer – the Just Ask Defence and the Character Enhancement Defence – are unsound. Thus, I conclude that, despite its ubiquity, popularity, and aura of piety, petitionary prayer on behalf of others is logically incoherent.

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I. Introduction

Religion has been a salient part of human behavior for thousands of years. Most religious traditions, including the notable monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have employed prayer to communicate with the Divine. The most publicly acknowledged form of prayer today is a petitionary prayer in which a praying person, or orant, asks God to assist those in significant need. I'll refer to this kind of prayer as, appropriately enough, prayer for others, and I'll abbreviate it as "PFO." PFO has become a stock response to tragic events not only from ordinary religious folk but also from public figures such as politicians, celebrities, and social commentators.

Affirmation that one is praying for others is voiced with such expressions as:

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to you."
"We are praying for you."
"You are in our prayers."

A specific example of PFO is a prayer developed by the Mennonite World Conference for the people of Japan following a devastating earthquake and tsunami there in 2011 that took 22,000 lives and caused extensive property damage. It's called *A Prayer for the People*.

A Prayer for the People

God of healing and mercy, we come before you with our hearts filled with grief as we see the devastation. We pray that your presence would be felt by those who are grieving, who are injured, who have lost their homes and livelihoods. We pray for wisdom and safety for those who are responding to the people in need and the many challenges left in the wake of the event. We pray for our church, that it may be a witness to your compassion and care for all who suffer. God, you are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. For this we give you thanks and ask that you hear our prayers for the affected people.



Photo by Perry Officer 1st Class Matthew Bradley, March 15, 2011. Wikimedia Commons

Members of the Fairfax County Urban Fire and Rescue Team head into downtown Ofunato to search for survivors following an 8.9-magnitude earthquake, which triggered a devastating tsunami through this Japanese coastal city. Teams from the United States, United Kingdom and China were on scene to assist in searching for missing residents.

It's hard not to be impressed with the eloquent expression of piety and compassion contained in this and other such prayers for the afflicted. Nevertheless, I will argue that a close analysis reveals that PFO is in fact logically incoherent.

II. The Incoherence of PFO

I'll proceed by showing that the two main lines of defence of the cogency of PFO are both logically deficient.

Just Ask Defence of the coherency of PFO

The first and more common line of defence I call the Just Ask Defence. It's rooted in the theistic belief that God is the most perfect being possible. As such, he possesses maximal power, knowledge, and goodness. Such powers would give him the means, method, and motivation to assist the afflicted. Thus, according to the Just Ask Defence, it's perfectly reasonable to petition such a credentialed deity on behalf of oth-

ers. In response, I offer three reasons why the Just Ask Defence is logically flawed.

Response to the Just Ask Defence

The **first reason** is that the Just Ask Defence is based on the misconception that God is a sort of paladin of goodness who can be persuaded to fight against the pain, suffering, and evil which run rampant in the world *independently* of him – a view not too different from popular portrayals of Superman.

This is a misconception, however, because God is *not* simply a powerful, knowledgeable, and morally good *bystander* to extant pain, suffering, and evil. On the contrary, as the most perfect being possible, God is responsible for everything that exists or happens, including, for example, the aforementioned Japanese disaster.

Thus, it would be incoherent for an orant to beseech God, the very person responsible for the pain and suffering of those being prayed for, to now suddenly reverse course and start to al-

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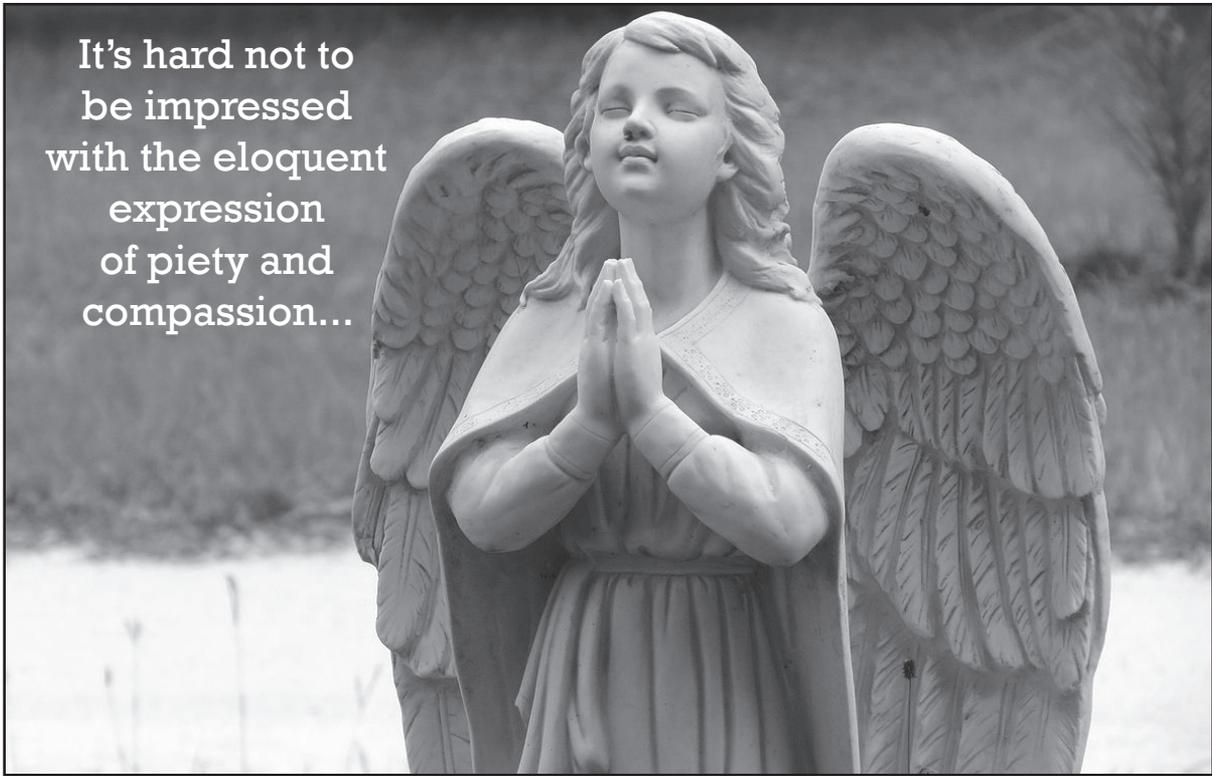


Photo: Statue of an angel at a monastery in Florida. Rae K. Hauck, Wikimedia Commons

leviate the pain and suffering that he just caused or permitted. It would be like pleading with a bank robber to please set up a fund to reimburse those whose money he just stole from the bank.

The **second reason** why the Just Ask Defence is logically flawed is that it entails the incoherent claim that an orant knows better than an omniscient being what level of suffering is appropriate in any situation, say, for example again, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. Let me explain how the Just Ask Defence entails this incoherent claim.

Being omniscient, God would have caused or permitted the Japanese disaster knowing full well beforehand exactly what its effects would be, including the 22,000 fatalities and the extensive property and other collateral damage. He would not have caused or permitted the earthquake and tsunami if he didn't want those effects to occur. Thus, it would be logically incoherent as well as highly presumptuous for an orant to second guess God by calling on him to remove those effects.

The **third reason** why the Just Ask Defence is logically flawed is that God is mandated

by his omnibenevolent nature to always bring about the best possible world, or, as we might more clearly say in this context, the best possible future. Supporters of the Just Ask Defence fail to factor this mandate into their reasoning. Let me dilate on this point.

Referring once again back to the Japanese disaster, the outcomes prayed for in the previously read Mennonite Prayer, for example, are either a part of the best possible future or they're not. The orant, of course, believes that they are a part of the best possible future, and thus prays to God to bring those outcomes about. However, only an omniscient being could know for sure whether what the orant is praying for *is* actually a part of the best possible future.

But here's the rub. It really doesn't matter one way or the other because if the outcomes that the orant is praying for are, in fact, a part of the best possible future, then God *must* arrange for them to happen. His omnibenevolent nature would demand it. On the other hand, if the outcomes that the orant is praying for are not a part of the best possible future, then God must arrange that those outcomes do not hap-

pen. Once again, his omnibenevolent nature would demand it. In either case, God's actions would not be affected by what any orant is praying for. God's actions would be affected solely by his infallible knowledge of what outcomes would be a part of the best possible future. In short, therefore, PFO is incoherent because it is superfluous.

Character Enhancement Defence of the coherency of PFO

I turn now to the second main line of defence of the coherency of PFO, which I term the Character Enhancement Defence. This is a less obvious, but still *prima facie* attractive defence of PFO. It holds that PFO is coherent because it leads to important enhancements of the orant's character, such as compassion, generosity, humility, or kindness that the orant would not otherwise attain.

Response to the Character Enhancement Defence

I will argue that the overarching fundamental reason why the Character Enhancement Defence is logically flawed is that the pain and suffering of the innocent is too high a price to pay for the possibility of some character enhancement for the orant. The argument for this unfolds in **Five Points** as follows.

Point (1): The pain, suffering and losses that trigger PFO are almost always acute and extensive, as was experienced in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami disaster. On the other hand, there is usually no PFO for hangnails or hair loss.

Point (2): There's little reason to think that PFO actually produces any significant character enhancement. After all, characters are the complex products of many years of disparate social, economic, educational, and psychological influences. It would be unlikely that the occasional PFO would add much, if anything, to the makeup of one's character. In fact, I would say that it's

much more likely that already existing positive character traits cause PFO, rather than that PFO causes positive character traits.

Point (3): Sometimes PFO produces character *harm* for orants. For example, it may be that the orant's petitions are unfruitful in that the suffering of those being prayed for is not reduced. Consequently, orants may experience disappointment, discouragement, disillusionment, and ultimately, perhaps, even apostasy as a result of their engaging in PFO.

Point (4): There are morally preferable ways to achieve character enhancement that don't depend on the pain and suffering of the innocent. For instance, God could facilitate character enhancement by encouraging people to engage in supererogatory acts toward one another or toward animals, or he could encourage people to work at perfecting their athletic, intellectual, aesthetic, or arts and crafts capabilities. Such means of character enhancement would be morally superior to those means that use the pain and suffering of innocent persons, and would, therefore, be the morally preferred option for a being described as omnibenevolent.

Point (5): The Character Enhancement Defence entails the morally questionable practice of God treating suffering people as means to an end, namely, the end of character enhancement of orants, rather than treating suffering people properly as ends in themselves. Unfortunately, the idea of the legitimacy of treating suffering people as means to an end is not rare in theistic circles. For example, Catholic apologist and priest Fr. Philip E. Dion, C.M., says:

As St. Augustine said, "There would be no martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecutions." Hence, it is by the wickedness He permits in some men, that God stimulates others to goodness and virtue and sanctity. For example, God willed to permit the evil of guilt in Hitler and so many Nazis and communists who ran the concentration camps in World War II... Because of that suffering, many victims are saints before the



Photo from Wikimedia Commons

[B]y her own report, Mother Teresa once told a woman to imagine that her suffering was kisses from Jesus. Mother Teresa said: “Suffering, pain, sorrow, humiliation, feelings of loneliness, are nothing but the kiss of Jesus, a sign that you have come so close that he can kiss you. ‘Tell Jesus to stop,’ the woman responded.”

throne of God today who would not be there had God not permitted the evil will and sin of their persecutors.¹

The recently sainted Mother Teresa, esteemed the world over by Christians and some non-Christians as well, had this to say about suffering: “The suffering of the poor is something very beautiful and the world is being much helped by the nobility of this example of misery and suffering.”²

I surmise that most of those undergoing suffering would be considerably less convinced of the “beauty” or “nobility” of their suffering than were Mother Teresa or Fr. Dion. In fact, columnist Valerie Terico relates that:

...by her own report, Mother Teresa once told a woman to imagine that her suffering was kisses from Jesus. Mother Teresa said: “Suffering, pain, sorrow, humiliation, feelings of loneliness, are nothing but the kiss of Jesus, a sign that you have come so close that he can kiss you. ‘Tell Jesus to stop,’ the woman responded.”³

III. Recap

I started by pointing out that PFO is a prominent and growing practice around the world today. I then I argued that PFO’s two main lines of defence – the Just Ask and the Character Enhancement Defences – are logically deficient. And so, I conclude that despite its ubiquity, popularity, and aura of piety, PFO is logically incoherent. •

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Notes

1. “Does God Will It?” *The Priest*, March 1978: 19.
2. President of Rationalist International Sanal Edamaruku, “India has no reason to be grateful to Mother Teresa,” https://mukto-mona.com/Articles/mother_teresa/sanal_ed.htm.
3. Valerie Tarico, columnist, “Why Right-Wing Christian Leaders Are Often Indifferent to Needless Suffering” *AlterNet*, 9-23-15.