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WHY A BELIEVER COULD BELIEVE THAT GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS

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ABSTRACT: In a previous issue of this journal Michael Veber argued that God could not answer certain prayers because doing so would be immoral. In this article I attempt to demonstrate that Veber's argument is simply the logical problem of evil applied to a possible world. Because of this, his argument is susceptible to a Plantinga-style defense.

In his paper 'Why Even a Believer Should Not Believe that God Answers Prayers' Michael Veber argues that if God answers prayers on behalf of ailing individuals in certain kinds of cases, then God is immoral. The kinds of cases that Veber is concerned with are those relating to recent empirical studies concerning the efficacy of prayer. There are those who believe that such studies lend support to the idea that prayer has curative powers, but Veber believes any curative powers that are thought to stem from prayer must have another cause because it would be immoral for God to answer these prayers (Veber 2007). In this paper, I will demonstrate that Veber's argument has a structural similarity to the logical problem of evil, and because of that, is susceptible to a Plantinga-style defense. The result of this susceptibility is that Veber's argument fails to provide a reason to cease believing that God could answer prayer.

Veber notes that recent double-blind experiments on the efficacy of prayer have led some to believe that praying for individuals undergoing treatment can reduce the suffering of these individuals.¹ Rather than attacking empirical data or the method of the study, Veber argues instead that if it is true that individuals in these studies suffered less because of prayer, then God is immoral.² Veber's ar-

1. The two studies that Veber refers to are Cha et al. 2001 and Krucoff et al. 2001.

2. Those that believe prayer is efficacious often end up stating something like, 'Well, if God exists and is omnipotent, then why couldn't he answer prayer?' Veber's argument does not simply hinge on God's ability to perform such an action, but on whether he could perform it given his moral perfection.

gument does not contest the existence of God or even God's ability to answer prayer. Instead, he seeks to show that the notion of prayer's efficacy in the sorts of studies described 'contradicts the very essence of the standard conception of God (Veber 2007, 179).' If prayer of the sort described in these studies is efficacious, then God is immoral, and this consequence is, of course, unacceptable to believers.

Veber's Argument

Veber argues that certain scientific methodologies employed in double-blind studies are useful for deciding which causal factors are relevant in bringing about some effect. Because the world is a 'noisy place' it is 'difficult to know, of any particular C, whether it is a determinant of E.' If one can 'minimize causal noise ... by isolating C from any other possible determinants that might be occurring in conjunction with it,' then in that situation, if C is followed by E one has 'good reason to believe that C is a determinant of E.' Veber goes on to say, 'If an event has only one determinant, then, were it not for the determinant, the event would not be.' The purpose of double-blind studies of the kind Veber is concerned with is to rule out, or minimize, cases involving causal overdetermination. That is, to minimize the chance that some event E has more than one determinant. Veber then states that one's 'epistemic position with respect to the causal claim will be as good as it is with respect to the corresponding counterfactual' and when cases of causal over-determination are ruled out, 'the truth of "C causes E" is a sufficient condition for the truth of "If C had not occurred, E would not have occurred (Veber 2007, 181)."'

If it is true that one of the patients in one of these double-blind studies suffered less *as a result of prayer* then the following counterfactual C is true:

C: If the patient had not been prayed for, then that patient would have continued to suffer (Veber 2007, 183).

The data from the studies suggest, for some, that the prayer was *the* determinant of reduced suffering. Had there been no prayer, the patient would have continued to suffer. It is the suffering of that patient in possible worlds in which there is no prayer that leads Veber to the conclusion that if C is true, then God is immoral. He argues, 'Let α be a patient who received remote intercessory prayer... Let w be the nearest non-prayer world. And assume that C holds because of Divine Intervention.

1. If C then α suffers in w .
2. If α suffers in w then God is immoral in w .
3. *.f God is immoral in w then God is not essentially good.*
4. Therefore, if C then God is not essentially good (Veber 2007, 183 (original italics)).'

Veber goes on to say that 1 and 3 are analytically true and supports 2 by claiming that ‘Since God relieves α ’s suffering in the actual world it is unnecessary in the actual world and if α ’s suffering is unnecessary in the actual world then it is unnecessary in w .’ A striking difference between the logical problem of evil and Veber’s argument is that instead of explaining why God allows actual evils in this world one must ‘explain why God allows suffering in some other nearby possible world (Veber 2007, 183).’ Veber is concerned with α ’s suffering in w and that suffering is what purportedly generates a contradiction between the standard conception of God and the belief that God answers prayers in these sorts of situations. To make that contradiction clear it will be helpful to examine the relevant propositions. The first is simply the consequent of 1,

5. α suffers in w .

That suffering in w is what leads Veber to state, ‘To say that prayers, in these sorts of experiments, are effective because God is answering them is *inconsistent* with our conception of God (Veber 2007, 186 (my emphasis)).’ The propositions that are purportedly inconsistent with 5 are those regarding the ‘standard conception of God.’ This understanding of God includes propositions like:

6. God is all knowing.

7. God is all powerful.

8. God is perfectly good.

Those who embrace this understanding of God would also maintain that these are part of God’s essence (Veber 2007, 182). As is the case in considering the logical argument from evil, one might avoid Veber’s problem altogether by denying one of these propositions, but that would constitute a major departure from a standard understanding of God.

Here one can see the similarity between Veber’s argument and the logical problem of evil. While the latter seeks to establish God’s non-existence, the former seeks to establish that even if, in the sorts of situations under consideration, the prayers were efficacious, it was *not* because of divine intervention. The conjunction of 6–8 would seem to entail that God would not allow α to suffer in w if he had the ability to relieve it. However, if C is true, then in w there is suffering, but, because God relieves it in this world, he has the ability to relive it in w as well.

While Veber recognizes the similarities between his argument and the problem of evil, he does not think theists can import solutions developed in that context. Against putative free will defenses he writes, ‘Suppose Joe is a subject of the Duke study and he is one of the patients who ended up, as a result of chance, in the group that received intercessory prayer.’ If C is true, then so is the counterfactual that had Joe not received prayer then he would have continued to suffer. Veber continues, ‘Now, whatever the merits of the free will explanation for evil generally, it does not work well here... The fact that Joe, in the nearest non-prayer world, is not being prayed for (and therefore, is suffering) has

nothing to do with decisions made by him.³

Veber also argues that a greater goods defense will not work because it violates what he calls the 'Immanence of Theodicy' assumption. According to this, 'any explanation that we offer for God's allowance of suffering in some world w , must be an explanation that applies to w (Veber 2007, 182).' However, we know that in the actual world God does relieve Joe's suffering. If God relieves Joe's suffering in the actual world, then that suffering must not be needed to accomplish some equal or greater good in that world. Because the only relevant difference between the actual world and w is that Joe receives intercessory prayer in one but not the other and because Joe's suffering is not needed in the actual world, it must not be needed in w either.

A Plantinga-style Response

In the famous paper 'Evil and Omnipotence' J.L. Mackie argued that evil is not compatible with other propositions that are traditionally believed to be true concerning God. If God is all-powerful and perfectly good, then evil should not exist because a perfectly good being would want to rid the world of evil and an all powerful being would have the ability to do so (Mackie 1955). But evil exists: thus there is an inconsistency between evil's existence and the traditional understanding of God.

One of the well-known responses to this argument is Alvin Plantinga's free will defense. Plantinga notes, 'One way to show that a proposition p is consistent with a proposition q is to produce a third proposition r whose conjunction with p is consistent and entails q . r , of course, need not be true or known to be true; it need not be so much as plausible (Plantinga 1974, 165).' The free will defense is an attempt to provide such an r . I will now attempt to demonstrate that there is a logically possible proposition that is consistent with 6–8 and entails 5.⁴ If I am successful, then Veber's argument for the non-efficacy of prayer will fail in the same way that many believe Mackie's argument fails.

What might such a proposition be that explains why God would allow Joe, as a result of not being prayed for, to suffer in w ? If God is concerned with his creatures coming to believe that he exists

3. (Veber 2007, 184). It should be noted that the free will defense advocated by Alvin Plantinga, arguably the most prominent proponent of the free will defense, does not require all suffering to be the result of the suffering person's free will as Veber seems to suggest. For example, a proponent of the free will defense might say that some infant suffered because of a decision made by another. As long as that decision is the result of a genuinely free will such suffering is consistent with a free will defense even though it did not stem from the individual actually suffering. While Veber's dismissal of a free will defense to his problem seems to rest on this suggestion I will not pursue the point further and instead employ the same strategy as the proponent of the free will defense.

4. My aim will not be to present a version of the free will defense but to instead use the same strategy of the free will defense. In other words, the r I provide need not have anything to do with the free will defense at all.

and that he cares for them, then the following is at least *possible*.

9. God has restricted his powers of interaction with humankind in such a way that those powers are exercised only in response to promptings from humankind.⁵

What might such promptings be? In general they could be any action or thought directed towards God, but in the case at hand, such a prompting would be a prayer on Joe's behalf. To reiterate the Plantinga-style response I am advocating, 9 does not need to be true or plausible; it only needs to be possible. If 9 is consistent with 6–8 and entails 5, then there is no contradiction in believing that God is essentially moral and that Joe suffers in *w*. I shall now attempt to demonstrate that 9 is consistent with 6–8.

If we understand 9 to be a self-imposed restriction, then there is no inconsistency between it and God being all powerful. It is not that God *cannot* interact with humankind without being prompted to do so; it is that he has decided not to do so. Number 9 also does not make any claims about God not knowing about Joe's suffering in *w*, it is just that he refrains from relieving Joe's suffering until prompted by someone to relieve it. So 9 is consistent with 6 and 7. Here one might object that 9 is inconsistent with 8 because the principle itself is immoral. The objection might go as follows: God has the ability and knowledge to relieve a certain amount of suffering but does not choose to do so because no one requested it. This is just as malicious, the objection continues, as a father that watches his child suffer terribly but refrains from giving any assistance because she did not ask for it. Responding to this objection requires that we return to the greater goods defense.

A general characterization of the greater goods defense is that God allows certain evils because they play a role in serving a greater good or because preventing them would cause a greater evil. If 9 plays a role in some greater good or the absence of 9 would cause a greater evil, then 9 is not an immoral principle. There are two issues that must be dealt with: does 9 serve a greater good and is it in accord with the Immanence of Theodicy assumption? It may be that when God interacts with his creation it gives those aware of that interaction reason to believe that he exists and that he cares for his creation. If God relieved Joe's suffering without any prompting, then Joe would suffer less, but that unsolicited action would prevent God from being able to demonstrate his goodness to Joe through that relief.⁶ In addition, those aware of Joe's plight are also not afforded the opportunity to recognize God's goodness in relieving Joe's suffering.⁷ Recall that the greater good may be brought about by the

5. This does not depend upon, but is consistent with, John Wesley's famous quote, 'God does nothing but in answer to prayer' in 'A Plain Account of Perfection' Sec. 25, Q38, A5.

6. One might object that because it was a double-blind study α does not even know about the prayer. That may be true, but one could respond by saying the individuals responsible for conducting the study, those that actually prayed for α , and those that have read the results of the study all have been made more aware of God's existence and his love for his creation.

7. This does not commit one to believing that the suffering is initially imposed so that God can then reveal his

prevention of a worse evil. One could reasonably believe that temporally suffering in pain is a lesser evil than an eternal separation from God, especially if God's removal of that suffering is what deprived an individual from the opportunity of believing in God. If this is correct, then g prevents a greater evil in w and not some other world and this response satisfies the Immanence of Theodicy assumption.

This understanding of the nature of prayer, and in some situations God's response to prayer, focuses more on the reasons *why* God answers a prayer and less on what the answer actually is. If the reason God answers prayer is to reveal his goodness to his creation, then that creation having a better life because of the answer is a happy by-product and not the primary reason. Now that we have seen that g is consistent with 6–8, we can see how the conjunction of 6–8 and g entails 5. If C is true, then in w there is no prayer and Joe suffers. Joe suffers in w because there is no prompting from humankind for God to act on Joe's behalf. Once again, establishing the truth of g , or even its plausibility, is not required. The sheer fact that it is possibly true is enough to demonstrate that there is no contradiction between God allowing Joe to suffer in w and God being perfectly good.

We can now see that premise 2 turns out to be nothing more than the problem of evil applied to a possible world. But, because the truth of 2 depends on the incompatibility of 5 with 6–8, it turns out that 2 is false. The possibility of g being true is consistent with the traditional understanding of God as being omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good and would entail that a suffers in w . Plantinga's free will defense does not establish the existence of God, but does demonstrate that the existence of evil is not logically inconsistent with God's existence. In a similar way, this reply to Veber's argument does not establish the efficacy of prayer, but instead demonstrates that the suffering of a in w is consistent with God being wholly good and so a believer could believe that God answers prayers.⁸

goodness to those suffering. This only suggests that God's removal of the suffering without first being prompted to do so would remove an opportunity for that goodness to be revealed.

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