


Yesterday's Daily Bread: Petitionary Prayer for Past Events

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Abstract

The paper's subject is whether one is justified to pray for an event that has already happened from the point of view of the individual who is praying. About this, there are several possibilities, all of which I will consider: a) the past event is not known to the one who prays, b) it is known by them to have happened in a way which is not the desired one by the one praying and c), it is known to have happened according to their wishes. It also deals with two derived problems: if knowledge and ignorance are essential to our possibility of petitioning for something in the past, should we remain willfully ignorant about the past in order to pray to God so that it happened as we desire? Also, once we come to know that the past event did not go about as we desire, is it reasonable to pray to God so that our knowledge about the past is incorrect?

Keywords

Philosophy of prayer, God and time, retrocausality, Aquinas and prayer

1. Introduction

In this paper I will ask whether one is justified to pray for an event that has already happened from the point of view of the individual who is praying. I consider that a petitionary prayer is justified if it is one that could be answered in an affirmative way, i.e., that answering it in an affirmative way is within God's power. If the metaphysical assumptions that I hold (see next section) are true, then I think that everything that is metaphysically possible is within God's power, and thus potentially a subject to a justified petitionary prayer.

Knowledge about the past plays a key role in the arguments I will present in the following sections. In the context of this paper, by *knowledge* I mean *sufficiently justified belief*.¹ The fact that that belief could,

¹ I am aware that I am ignoring the *truth* aspect of knowledge. As it will become apparent, this is not important in my argument. It will be enough for the present paper to assume that

in principle, be false, does not bear any weight on my arguments about what kind of petitionary prayers are or are not justified. As we will see, this possibility is nevertheless important regarding one of the questions connected with this subject that I explore at the end of the paper. By *ignorance*, in turn, I understand the absence of a sufficiently justified belief.

So, regarding the general problem I want to address, there are several possibilities, all of which I will consider: a) the past event is not known to the one who prays, b) it is known to have happened in a way that is not the desired one by the one praying and c), it is known to have happened according to their wishes. My considerations will be unavoidably influenced by my metaphysical views regarding God, the nature of His power and relation to our world, among other things. So, the first section of this paper will be devoted to stating as clearly as possible the fundamental problem and to defining the metaphysical positions on which I will ground my answers. I will also address possibility a), which, in my view, is the simplest one to solve. The second section will delve into the specific problem of prayers for past events about which the person praying already knows they did not happen as he desires. The third section will deal with the opposite case, where a person prays to obtain something which he knows has already been obtained. In this section I will not only talk about the *justification* of the petitionary prayer but also about the *psychological stance* of the one praying.

Finally, the fourth section will deal with two interesting problems connected to the main question at hand: if knowledge and ignorance are essential to our possibility of petitioning for something in the past, should we remain willfully ignorant about the past in order to pray to God so that it happened as we desire? Also, once we come to know that the past event did not go about as we desire, is it reasonable to pray to God so that our knowledge about the past is incorrect?

2. God and Our Temporal World

Consider the following situation: John and Mary, a married couple, are praying together at time t_2 . Mary is praying so that a past event x at t_1 happened in a certain way P . She is aware that x is indeed in the past, but she doesn't know if Px or $\neg Px$. Is Mary justified in offering that petitionary prayer? John, on the other hand, knows how x went about, let's say, $\neg Px$. Is he justified in praying so that Px was the case?

the person believes their knowledge to be true for it to be relevant in our issues regarding petitionary prayers. I am therefore avoiding the myriad problems relating to the classical *justified true belief* account of knowledge, such as the Gettier problem, for example.

The answers to these questions depend to a great extent on some previously held positions regarding the nature of God's relation to time, and of our prayer's relation to God's will. About the first, I will assume in this paper the position presented in Stump & Kretzmann,² which is explicitly inspired by Boethius, and Aquinas' doctrine about God's life and its relation to temporal duration and succession. God is understood to be an eternal being, that is, a being that is not bounded by any temporal succession that can be described by temporal references such as *before* or *after*, *earlier* or *later*. Such a mode of duration, though, does not entail the impossibility of God communicating with a world which is subject to temporal succession. In the paper the authors coin the term *ET-simultaneity* when referring to this relation: 'If x and z are temporal entities, they co-exist if and only if there is some time during which both x and z exist. But if anything exists eternally, its existence, although infinitely extended, is fully realized, all present at once. Thus, the entire life of any eternal entity is co-existent with any temporal entity at any time at which that temporal entity exists. From a temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous with the whole infinite extent of an eternal entity's life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration'.³

Regarding the second question, I will also assume the Thomistic position, where God providentially creates our petitionary prayer while at the same time we truly offer the prayer.⁴ And it is in response to this prayer that God grants us certain goods. Aquinas is very careful not to say that our prayer *causes* God's granting of the good. He rather suggests that through prayer the person acquires a disposition that makes him apt to receive that good from God. Aquinas' explanation, in which God causes both our asking and his answer, should not be interpreted as an elimination of our free will or a negation that we are truly doing the asking.⁵ Therefore, in every instance where I say that God does or determines something *because* of our prayers, it should be interpreted in the sense Aquinas presents.

These assumptions do not mean that the discussion below does not have any application within other positions regarding these problems. Although there are of course many variations about the topic, most of them share some features with the position I assume, so my

² E. Stump, & N. Kretzmann, 'Eternity', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78/8 (1981), pp. 429-458.

³ E. Stump, & N. Kretzmann (1981), p. 441.

⁴ *S. Th.* II-II, q. 83, a. 2.

⁵ See Ignacio Silva, 'Revisiting Aquinas on Providence and Rising to the Challenge of Divine Action in Nature', *The Journal of Religion*, 94/3 (2014), pp. 277-291, for a more detailed exposition of Aquinas' doctrine of divine causation.

conclusions could have some bearing even if the metaphysical basis is not completely shared.⁶

If we consider the two questions posed in the beginning in this context, then we can at least make some progress into answering a). For if our prayers are useful, that is, if God grants us any goods because of them, and it is also true that God is atemporal, then He can give Mary at $t1$ what she requests at $t2$. The ultimate reason for this is precisely the fact that God is not within a temporal succession; so it can never be the case that Mary's prayer is heard by God *after* He has determined the relevant state of affairs in one way or another, or as Brown puts it, '[...] prayer P, though in a sense "addressed to God at time t" would nevertheless *not* be regarded as addressed to "God at time t", for "God at time t" is alleged to make no sense'.⁷ So, given that God is in a way the vertex that connects the petitionary prayer and the state of affairs referred to in the petitionary prayer, and that He is not subject to the temporal boundaries that rule the causal chains of the natural world, then there is no reason not to expect that a petitionary prayer offered today could have been answered by God yesterday. Of course, as Brown would say, we must remember that the 'have been' of the previous sentence is only referring to the effect God's answer had on the world, but not to God's act of answering our prayers: '[...] language about God is, strictly speaking, bound to be tenseless'.⁸

When we come to the second question b), though, the problem is not so simple. For if John knows that $\neg Px$ was the case at $t1$, then it would seem pointless for him to pray for Px at $t2$. This is an intuitive, widely held opinion: 'It is obviously absurd to pray in 1980 that Napoleon win at Waterloo when one knows what God does not bring about at Waterloo [...]'⁹, 'There is clearly one sense in which it does not make sense to pray for the past if one already knows how it turned out: cases where one knows that the desired state of affairs has not obtained'¹⁰. The reason to think this way is probably the common perception that what is in the past has already been determined, and not even God can change that. Regarding the past, it is what it is, and nothing can be done about it. As we will see later, this intuitive opinion can be more firmly grounded as a natural consequence of nature's relation to God.¹¹

⁶ See Kevin Timpe, 'Prayers for the past', *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), pp. 305-322, for a discussion about the relation between different positions regarding God's relation to time and prayers for the past.

⁷ G. Brown, 'Praying About the Past', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35/138 (1985), p. 86.

⁸ G. Brown (1985), p. 86.

⁹ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 505 note 78.

¹⁰ K. Timpe, (2005), p. 318.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis (1963: 184), says that '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' (*Miracles*, (London: Collins, 1963 [1947]), p. 184). As it will become apparent later, I agree that there is something to be said about the place of

Accepting these answers to my original questions brings about a difficulty: if we look at Mary's case, the ultimate cause of her justification for asking at $t2$ that Px was the case at $t1$, is that to produce Px at $t1$ is within God's omnipotence. At the same time, if we consider it from John's point of view, it seems that to determine Px at $t1$ is not within God's omnipotence. So we come to the conclusion that God can and cannot make Px to be the case at $t1$. There is, thus, a twofold origin for these issues: on the one hand, what God can and cannot do bears an important weight on what we can and cannot justifiably ask of Him. On the other, at least to some extent, there is something to be clarified about the relevance of the epistemic stance of the person who prays regarding the past states of affairs about which that person is praying.

Regarding the first, if we assume that God is atemporal and unchanging and that His relation to our temporal world is as described by Stump and Kretzmann's ET-simultaneity, then it follows that God cannot change the events that to us, but not to him, are in the past. And this is precisely because He holds no temporal relation to those events. It is not the case that God can will $\neg Px$ at $t1$, and then He can will Px to have happened at $t1$, at $t2$. Rather, God wills either $\neg Px$ or Px in his eternal now, which is simultaneous with both $t1$ and $t2$. Whatever He wills, though, it is what He wills, and not even He can will and not will it.

In the following section I will explore the epistemic relation between the individual praying and the thing to which the prayer refers.

3. Praying for What Has Not Happened

For the sake of the argument, I will offer more concrete details into John and Mary's case: as I said, John and Mary are a married couple. One day, feeling a little bit ill, she goes to the doctor, who advises her to go through some medical examinations because he thinks that there is a chance that she has cancer. After receiving the envelope with the exams' results, she goes home without reading them. When she arrives, John, too impatient to wait, reads the results in front of her, but without revealing their content to her. She then asks him to join her in one last prayer so that it was just a false alarm, and that she was never ill at all.

humility and submission to God's will in this discussion. As Mawson argues that it is not impossible for someone to pray so that something which that person knows did not happen, happened ('Praying for known outcomes', *Religious Studies*, 43/1 [2007], p. 80). Mawson equates the psychological disposition of someone who is praying for an outcome known to have not occurred with that of someone who tries to build a time-machine in order to change the past. Because some people would indeed try to do the second if they think they could, then those same individuals do the first. As I said, it is an interesting counterargument to Lewis' 'psychological impossibility' claim. However, from the metaphysical point of view, this makes no difference. Such prayers would not be justified.

In this version of the story x stands for Mary's organism, P for it being free of cancer, $t1$ for the moment when she took the exams, and $t2$ for the moment when they are praying. If we assume that $\neg Px$ was the case at $t1$, we are then saying that she was indeed ill with cancer, a fact of which she is not still aware at $t2$, though her husband is.

If they both pray at $t2$ so that Mary was never ill with cancer, then it is fair to say that in both cases the object of the prayer, that which the prayer is about, is Mary's health. More precisely, they are both asking for her not to have cancer at $t1$. This is what in the first place determines the species of the petition. Nevertheless, as I argued, while in Mary's case this petition is one which can be –or *could have been*– granted by God, in John's case it is not. But if in both cases the object of the prayer is what ultimately determines the species of the petition, and if God is one and the same for both, then it seems that there is no reason for that disparity in God's power to grant them their respective petitions.

I would like to suggest that the reason for the apparent disparity is that they are in fact not petitioning the same, or that the species of their respective petitions are not the same, and that the difference between them is such that in one case it is a request that God can fulfill, but in the other He cannot.

While up to now we have been considering that what Mary and John are petitioning is for her not to have cancer, we should instead take into account the metaphysics of prayer, as seen before, in order to more accurately define the object of the prayer.

In Mary's case, when she is asking at $t2$ for ' Px at $t1$ ', she is in fact asking that 'God, in his eternal now which is outside the $t1$ - $t2$ succession, determines that Px at $t1$ '. Because John knows how the past event went about, he knows how God determined it. In our scenario, he knows that God determined that ' $\neg Px$ at $t1$ '. So, were he to ask that ' Px at $t1$ ', he would in fact be asking that 'God, who wills that $\neg Px$ at $t1$, instead wills that Px at $t1$ '. This is a substantially different request, and it is one which is ungrantable by God, because, as I said, not even God can will and not will something. It is not that God is unable, in principle, to determine that ' Px at $t1$ ', or that there is some metaphysical impossibility involved in Mary's health as such. The problem is not in God, but in John. John is asking God to change His will, a will that is eternal and unchanging, and thus cannot be changed. Mary is instead taking into account the very eternity of God's will in her prayer, and it is precisely that which allows her to ask God confidently, at $t2$, for her health at $t1$. It is not that God's power becomes limited by John's knowledge about the past. Rather, it is John who becomes unable to offer the same petitionary prayer that Mary can still offer.

The solution I am proposing allows me to tackle some interesting aspects of petitionary prayers for the past. For example, consider that John knows not only that $\neg Px$ was the case at $t1$, but also that Mary does not know how x went about, *and* that she is praying for Px to

have been the case. Could John say that Mary's prayer is justified? The question is not referring to the spiritual benefits she could gain from humbly asking God for something. This could in fact very well be an important part of offering petitionary prayers, but in this context that is besides the point. As I said earlier, by *justified* I mean a petition that could be answered in a positive way. Could John say that Mary's request is one that God could grant? This change in the point of view is interesting, because now we are standing in a sort of middle ground between Mary's and John's point of view: on the one hand the petition itself has none of the difficulties John's petition had, but on the other we still have the knowledge about how the past went about.

If we consider the explanation given above, I think that John should say that, unlike his request for Mary to be free of cancer at *t1*, Mary's request is indeed one that God could grant. This is because she is asking something that does not violate the immutability of God's will. Nevertheless, John's special point of view allows him to say also that, while Mary is asking for something which God could grant—or, from their point of view, *could have* granted—, thus justifying her request, it is a request that God has decided not to grant. In a way, John's point of view is comparable to God's. God knows what His answer to our prayers is—or will be, or has been—even before and independently of our offering it. And we know that He knows that. But, according to Aquinas' position, this should not preclude us from offering petitionary prayers. The same can be applied to our intermediate case: John knows that God's answer was a negative one, but that does not mean that he should think that Mary's prayer is one that could have been granted at *t1*: it is merely the case that it was not.

4. Praying for What Has Happened

I have so far considered the case where John, when he reads the results, finds out that Mary is in fact ill with cancer. Let me assume for now that this is not the case, and that the results show that the doctor's warning was just a false alarm: Mary does not have cancer. Given that she does not know this fact yet, she still wants to say a prayer for her own health. What can John pray for, then, regarding his wife's health? Would he be justified, in this case, to ask for her not having cancer? It seems that in this case he would be avoiding the difficulties present in the last section. Even more, given that the fact that she has not developed cancer is testament to God's willing that she does not develop cancer, it would then seem that these are the perfect conditions for him to request that from God. How could anyone imagine a better petitionary prayer than that which cannot but obtain a positive answer, one which is bound to be in accordance with God's will? The objection that there is no point in asking that which God has already granted because causal chains

in this world only go in the past-to-future direction cannot be argued, precisely because petitionary prayer involves a causal chain that is not, to some extent, bounded by temporal laws of this world. As I showed above, a Thomistic account of nature's relation to God frees God from any temporal bounds such as the ones we experience when we perceive cause and effect relations, or even when we ourselves take part in one. When it comes to God, what I request today might have been given to me yesterday.

While the objection based on the direction of causes and effects can be answered from a Thomistic point of view, Timpe presents a different objection, one which is also based on the psychology of prayer. Using the example of a woman whose father had been in danger of being killed by a tornado, but that ultimately ended up being safe, he proposes that, if she was aware of that outcome, she might present the following objection to praying for her father's safety: 'She might think to herself, "Wait, even if I don't pray, my father will be safe from the tornado – God's not going to change the past because I don't pray. My prayer is clearly not needed on this score. And given that, it would be more worthwhile for me to do something else with my time, such as pray for something else, or just thank God for bringing it about he is safe"'.¹² So in his objection knowing that her father is safe weakens the woman's motivation for praying for her father, and allows her to reason her way out of that petitionary prayer in order to use her time in some more useful way. But, given that her refusal to pray on behalf of her father's safety is just a result of a choice she made, it is certainly possible that she –although without a strong motivation– offers the petitionary prayer all the same. According to Timpe, if she does so, then that petitionary prayer should be classified as an *impetratory prayer*, denoting a prayer that is offered in order to obtain some desired result that is indeed granted by God, and that is granted at least in part *because* the petitionary prayer was offered.¹³ I think Timpe's answer to the question about the status of petitionary prayers directed to past events about which we have knowledge, while it avoids the typical confusions caused by the improper application of temporal categories to the dynamics of prayer, does not go far enough in the analysis of the psychology of prayer. A petitionary prayer, whether it is answered positively by God or not, is in essence a request directed towards God so that He makes a certain state of affairs to come about. This means that the person offering the prayer must have a desire to obtain a certain good, that is, a desire that the requested state of affairs is in fact brought about. This is part of the very definition of what it is to request something. In the absence of all desire to obtain a certain good, a petition for

¹² K. Timpe, (2005), p. 319.

¹³ K. Timpe, (2005), p. 319.

that good is nothing more than empty words. It is true that the desire to obtain the requested good might not be free of tensions, such as in St. Augustine's famous prayer for chastity and continence¹⁴ or, more dramatically, Christ's petition to the Father that '[...] not my will, but thine, be done'¹⁵. Something can be perceived as good, and thus be desired, and at the same time cause some level of rejection from the same person because it is thought that it will bring some kind of pain to them. However, in those cases there is, to some degree, a perception of the goodness of the thing that causes our desire to obtain it. To be able to desire the obtention of some good, however, the person must perceive that good as one that is not currently possessed at the time of the act of desiring, and thus at the time of the act of requesting it. In other words, if a person knows that they possess a certain good, then they will not be psychologically able to desire its obtention, and thus any prayer where they requests to obtain that good cannot be but empty words, void of any significant content which could count as a genuine request. Of course, a person might pray so that the possession of some good is preserved, or even increased. The woman from Timpe's case could ask God to preserve his father's health and well-being in the future, or to increase his vitality. But if her father's safety during the tornado constitutes a good –as it certainly does– the obtention of which can be desired, then to desire to obtain it, it must be perceived as not being possessed. She must think he is in some danger of being negatively affected by the tornado. The possession of the good causes a sort of rest of the desire. As I said, to desire the obtention of some good is, by definition, to desire to have something that I don't currently think I have. That change from *not having it* to *having it* is what constitutes the very *obtaining it*. If this is the case, then after the husband finds out that his wife is healthy and does not have cancer he will not be able to genuinely request God to make her wife healthy, at least regarding the particular cancer-related preoccupation we are considering. He could, if he wanted, externally express the same words as his wife, who at the time doesn't know she is healthy. But his newly acquired knowledge will make his petition to be void of any request in the true sense of the word.

Unlike the previous analytic argument against the possibility of petitioning what we know has not happened, based on the impossibility of petitioning something that we know cannot be given to us, and where we had to assume that the person who prayed held a certain metaphysical point of view which showed them that such a request could not be granted, in this last case there is no need for any metaphysical claim on behalf of the one praying. It is the very knowing that they already

¹⁴ *Confessiones*, VIII, 17

¹⁵ Luke, 22:42.

have something that which necessarily precludes them from being able to request it, regardless of what they think about God or the world, and the relations between them.

5. Some Problems Regarding Willful Ignorance and Iterative Petitions

One of the conditions that a person who prays has to fulfil in order to be able to justifiably ask God for something that is in the past, I argued, is to be ignorant about how the past went about. If this is accepted, then they will truly be able to ask God and to expect a positive answer from Him, even if they know that God might very well choose to not give them what they are asking for. And it seems that if one wants to obtain something, and one can pray to God for it, it is wise to ask God for what one desires. So, I will consider now whether it is justified to be willingly ignorant about the past, so that one can justifiably pray for things in the past expecting God to grant one's prayer.

It would seem that, unless being willfully ignorant about what went about in the past is something morally reprehensible in itself, it is desirable to remain ignorant about a past state of affairs so one can still pray to God for that state of affairs to have resulted in some desired way. There are, of course, some past state of affairs about which one is morally bound to know, if that knowledge is within our reach: for example, if Mary were John's little daughter instead of his wife, and if the disease for which she is being examined had a fast rate of development, the he would arguably be bound to know the results as soon as he can in order to take quick action, if needed. Similarly, public officials are usually bound to know certain things that happened in the past, the knowledge of which is within their reach, and that are essential to allow for good decision making. However, this is not always the case. There are many situations where an avoidable ignorance is not morally reprehensible in itself: if I took an exam yesterday, and the results are available to me today, it does not seem to be morally wrong to delay my knowing about the exam's results, if not indefinitely, at least for a certain amount of time. In John and Mary's example, and assuming that the potential cancer is not a fast developing one, a difference of hours or a few days is not relevant to how the corresponding treatment is going to be. Would Mary be justified in delaying her reading the results in order to continue her prayers for her health? In order to answer this question properly, it is necessary to remember that the action of praying is not an action where the one doing the prayer simply triggers a chain of causes and effects that ends, or could end, with the obtention of a desired good. It is rather an action that, in itself, constitutes a personal relation between an *I* and a *You*.

Generally speaking, there are of course various kinds of requests: when a person asks for a certain dish at a restaurant, for which they are going to pay, they are, in a loose sense, making a request. However, and although it can be applied analogically, a request is such inasmuch as there is some gratuitness involved, and thus, some kind of inequality between the one asking and the one being asked. Thus, a request implies the hope, on the asking party, that the party who is being asked possesses some degree of generosity and unselfishness. In the case of God, this gratuitness is absolute: what could God give that He truly and fundamentally *owes* to the creature? By definition, what the Creator gives is given out of His generosity. This kind of relation implied in a petitionary prayer carries with it –or at least it should– the recognition that the *You* to which the prayer is directed is not only generous, but absolutely generous, because He cannot truly receive anything from the creature in return for the goods He grants. Thus, a request to God should always contain the conditional with which Christ offered his prayer on the night of his passion: *nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done*. To reject this clause explicitly would amount to say that while God is great enough to grant me whatever I need, He is not great enough to know what those things are. His infinite power is rooted in the same infinite source of being from where his infinite knowledge stems. If a petitionary prayer is offered under these conditions, then, as I said, it will not be offered as the starting point of a series of impersonal events that will, hopefully, end up with the obtention of a good. It will rather be offered as the request one person makes to Another, in the recognition that the One being asked knows better than the one asking what is good for them not only in general, but also in their particular and contingent circumstances. Moreover, such a petition can only be true if it is offered in the context of a broader desire to deepen the personal relationship that particular petition is just a part of, for what could one ask that is greater than He to whom we are asking?

If this is the nature of the relationship constituted by the act of prayer, then it hardly seems appropriate for Mary to purposefully withhold from knowing the past in order to petition God about it. Because a more profound consideration of the nature of petitionary prayer reveals the infinite wisdom and power of He to whom we direct our prayers. If we accept that nothing that has happened would have happened if God did not will it to happen, then the knowledge of the past becomes the –partial and imperfect– knowledge of God's will. Then, at the moment Mary knows that knowledge about the past is within her reach, refusal to know it *in order to petition God about it* would entail a sort of inversion of values: she would be refusing to know what God has chosen, and is therefore what He considers to be good for her, in order to ask Him to grant her what she thinks is good for her. Moreover, such a decision on her part would contradict the personal character of the relation that is at the essence of any kind of prayer, for she would

be treating God as a mere instrument to obtain something that she desires. As such, a petitionary prayer offered in those terms would be self-defeating, incapable of reaching the all-generous, all-powerful and all-knowing God as a true petition, not because He will choose not to receive it, but because there is nothing to be received in the first place. Of course, God could still grant her what she desires, but then He would not be granting it as an answer to a prayer, as He can and certainly does many –if not most– times.

John and Mary's story assumes that the document that contained the results of the medical exams she underwent reflected the true situation of her health, that is, that the chances of her having no cancer *and* the document saying that she has it –and viceversa– are null. This means that, in the scenario where she in fact has cancer, after she reads the document that says that she is ill a prayer for her never having it is unreasonable, because it implies a request for the impossible. Nevertheless, there is another possibility that I have not yet considered: after reading the results Mary could still pray for her not to have cancer *and* also that the document with the results is wrong. Such a prayer would be free of the problems I presented earlier regarding prayers for things about which we know how they went about. Because Mary would not be praying for something that she knows has happened not to have happened. Instead, she would be asking God that something that might have happened –a mistake in the exams, or in the transmission of their results–, but that she does not know if it has or has not, to have actually happened. This kind of solution to the problem presented by the knowledge someone has about past events has its foundation on the fact that human knowledge in general, and knowledge about the past in particular, is always mediated. In the case of knowledge about the past this mediation takes many forms: the testimony of another person, documents or material evidence, among others. In Mary's particular case, mediators include the medical doctor who took her exams, the equipment used, the people who were in charge of printing and sending the envelope, etc. But we could also consider her own perceptual apparatus and mental faculties, such as her memory. Thus, Mary potentially has many intermediate elements about which she can have doubts and that can thus be the object of her prayers. In fact, the options are limitless: Mary could always find a new step where the mediation between what actually happened at t_1 and her act of knowing at t_2 went wrong. And she could even pray to God so that there is one that she does not know about. The possibilities are endless. Moreover, this has also an important bearing on the previous question about praying for the desired outcome after the one doing the prayer already knows that that outcome turned out to be the case. Because if one is justified in *hoping* that there was a problem in the epistemic mediators when the event was not as requested, then one is also justified in *fearing* that an equal situation took place when the event was as requested. So, either way

we seem to be in a situation where one is justified in continuing the petitionary prayer indefinitely.

The puzzle is but a case of the more general problem of fallibilism: under what conditions one can and should accept something as genuine knowledge even if one accepts that the means by which one comes to know something are fallible. The infinite proliferation of potential doubts which I pointed out earlier is a sign that, although to some degree a prayer such as the one described above could have merit, there needs to be a rational criterion to assess where she has to stop and accept that the past happened, fundamentally, just as it appears to have happened.

In Mary's case, I think we could propose a gradual scenario, where she is, in a limited way, rationally justified in following the iterative strategy, that is, asking God that the past went about like she desires, and that the mediators that tell her that it went otherwise are just false signs of a past that never was. For if the hospital that took the tests is famous for giving false positives in cancer patients, it would be natural for her to pray in the above described way. Or if the technology used in them were a new one, with little or no tests on its behalf. However, if her cancer was detected by a well known medical doctor, using very well tested techniques that do not rely on complex technology – a simple surgical extraction of the affected tissue, for example–, then her refusal to accept those mediators as reliable ones could reasonably be qualified as an irrational stance to take. Of course, there is no point where one could indicate a clear cut difference between two mediators, one which could be doubted, and one which should not. As in science itself, it is a question of prudence, and in these matters, also of humility and submission to God's will.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I offered an answer to what I think is the question at the core of these problems: why God cannot make our past be in a way we desire if we know how that past went about, while He can do it if we do not. The answer is grounded on a Thomistic understanding of God's nature, and assumes that He is an eternal God, who nevertheless has a profound relation –in fact, the most profound possible– with the natural, temporal, world. If that is the case, then the temporal precedence of the event with respect to our prayer is of no significance to the efficacy of the prayer, because God does not hear our prayers either before or after we say them. In fact, he does not do anything before or after anything else happens. His life is an atemporal one. But, the fact that the event is in the past with respect to us is important because that gives us the possibility of knowing how it went about. And it is this knowledge that is relevant here. Because our knowledge about the past

is also knowledge about God's will. If we know what happened, we know what God wants to have happened. And, in that case, to ask God that it was otherwise means asking Him to want something different from what He wants. And that even God cannot do. The argument also proposes that there is a sort of fundamental psychological impossibility in wanting to obtain that which we know we have already obtained. And this is the basis for my claim that we cannot possibly pray to God so that something which we know has happened, has happened.¹⁶

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