

“May It Have Happened, Lord!”

Open Theism and Past-Directed Prayers

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Imagine the situation. You wake up with a bolt, realizing in shock that you completely forgot to set your alarm the previous night and now you’ve overslept. You check the clock beside your bed: it’s 9:37 am. You’re going to be late for work, but that’s not the worst of it. One of your close friends had an appointment for a very important job interview at 8:30 am, and you had *promised* him that you would pray both before and during the interview. You promised to pray that he would get to the interview in good time, that he would be calm and collected, that he would be able to think and speak clearly, and that he would come across as a very competent candidate. Hastily you shoot up the following prayer: “Lord, please forgive me for failing to pray as I promised. But I pray now that the interview will have gone well for Alan.”

Does it make sense to pray such a prayer? Is it coherent to pray about things that are now in the past? Is it coherent to offer a prayer for which any divine answer would have to temporally precede the prayer itself? Whether or not they make sense, I suspect such past-directed prayers are not uncommon among believers. In some cases it matters a great deal to us whether such prayers are coherent, and, more to the point, whether they are *answerable*.¹ Such prayers may concern matters of life and death. Indeed, they may concern matters of *eternal* life and death.²

In this paper, I explore two related questions. First, are past-directed prayers (hereafter, PDPs) coherent and answerable in principle? Secondly, what are the implications of the answer to that first question for open theism, one of the tenets of which is that God lacks comprehensive foreknowledge of the future free decisions of his creatures? I will argue that

¹ Or more precisely: answerable *in the affirmative*.

² An acquaintance of mine told me that following his father’s death he prayed that his unbelieving father “might have trusted Christ as his Savior before he died.”

PDPs are indeed coherent and answerable in principle, but only if God has comprehensive foreknowledge of future free decisions. If there are actual instances of answered PDPs, this invites a deductive argument against open theism, based on the following premise: *If open theism were true, there would be no instances of answered PDPs.* I then consider some possible open theist responses to this deductive argument, concluding that the deductive argument is too ambitious. However, a more modest *evidential* argument against open theism can be offered instead, which relies on defeasible rather than deductive reasoning. Such an argument still depends on there being actual instances of answered PDPs—or at least *apparent* instances. I therefore conclude with a discussion of some plausible cases of apparent answers to PDPs.

1. What Counts as a Past-Directed Prayer?

Before proceeding we need a working definition of a past-directed prayer. Rather than re-invent the wheel, I propose here to adopt the definition offered by Kevin Timpe in his insightful paper, “Prayers for the Past.”³ Timpe notes that such prayers are *petitionary* or *impetratory* in that they entreat God to bring about—or rather to have brought about—some state of affairs (e.g., protection or guidance for a loved one). Timpe therefore refers to “past-directed impetratory prayers.” He defines a past-directed impetratory prayer (PIP) as follows:

PIP =_{df} A petitionary prayer that meets the following four criteria:

- (i) the prayer is offered by an agent A at time t_2 ;
- (ii) the prayer requests that God bring about some state of affairs S at time t_1 (where t_1 is prior to t_2);
- (iii) the prayed-for state of affairs S is brought about by God, at least in part, as a result of A’s prayer; that is, God’s knowledge of A’s prayer is one of the reasons He has for bringing S about; and
- (iv) God desires to bring about S only if A prays for S, such that if A does not pray for S, then God will not bring it about.⁴

³ Kevin Timpe, “Prayers for the Past,” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 305–22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

I have two minor criticisms of Timpe's definition. The first is that criterion (iv) appears to exclude *corporate* prayers. Suppose that a group of six people pray together for God to bring about some past state of affairs S. It may be that God's willingness to bring about S doesn't hang on the prayer of any *one* of those people, in which case criterion (iv) would not be met. (If one or two of them hadn't prayed for S, God would still have brought about S; but if none of them had prayer for S, God would not have brought about S.) It seems wrong to say that this wouldn't be a case of past-directed impetratory prayer. Ideally then, (iv) should be modified to allow for the possibility of corporate prayers.

The second criticism is that there seems to be a category of past-directed prayers—or of closely related prayers—that Timpe's definition does not recognize. Consider the following scenario. A man is hiking in a remote part of the mountains; he falls down a slope, resulting in a severe cut to his arm. He realizes that he is bleeding profusely and will die if he is not found quickly and given medical attention, so he prays to God for help. Coincidentally—or so it appears—another hiker, who is a trained ER doctor, is walking in the same area and comes upon the injured man. He administers a tourniquet and saves the man's life.

Here we have a case in which the prayer wasn't *explicitly* directed toward the past, but the answer to the prayer—or at least *elements* of that answer—needed to be in place prior to the prayer being offered. In the example given, the second hiker would need to have set out hours before the accident occurred. The answer to the prayer (assuming it was an answer to the prayer and not sheer coincidence) had to temporally precede the prayer, at least in part. I suspect that such "retroactively answered prayers" are far more common than we realize, but surely they raise the same sort of questions as explicitly past-directed prayers (i.e., prayers where the petitioner explicitly asks God to have brought about states of affairs in the past).⁵

In order to accommodate this category of prayers, where the past-directedness is implicit rather than explicit, we should modify criterion (ii) along these lines:

⁵ So as to avoid begging the question regarding whether such prayers have ever been actually answered, I should really say "prayers that *would* require a (partially) retroactive answer" rather than "retroactively answered prayers."

- (ii) the prayer requests either (a) that God bring about some state of affairs S at time t_1 (where t_1 is prior to t_2) or (b) that God bring about some state of affairs S^* at time t_2 where God's bringing about S^* at t_2 specifically requires that God bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 (where t_1 is prior to t_2).⁶

In what follows, then, "past-directed prayer" (PDP) refers to any petitionary prayer that meets Timpe's definition with the above modification to criterion (ii), thus allowing for both explicitly and implicitly past-directed prayers.

2. Could God Answer Past-Directed Prayers?

There's no question that PDPs *as such* are possible. The fact is that people can and do offer PDPs, regardless of whether those prayers are coherent. The interesting question is whether it makes sense to offer such prayers; in other words, whether it is possible for such prayers to be answered.

One significant consideration here is the petitioner's knowledge of the past. If Sam knows that his friend died of cancer at some date in the past, clearly it makes little sense for Sam to petition God to bring it about that his friend *didn't* die on that date. (Here I make the reasonable assumption that the past is fixed in such a way that past states of affairs cannot be altered by subsequent actions.) So one condition on a coherent PDP must be this: the person who asks God to have brought about S must not already know that S did *not* obtain.

But what about the case in which the petitioner already knows that S *did* obtain? There's nothing obviously contradictory about a PDP of that kind, although it does seem strange to think that someone would offer a PDP for something that they already know to have obtained. Such a prayer appears to be senseless because it appears to be *superfluous*. If S has already obtained, what difference does it make whether or not I ask God to bring about S ? What *need* is there for such a prayer?

⁶ I say "specifically requires" so as to exclude very general preconditions for divine answers to prayer, such as *God having created a universe* or *God having created human beings*. Without this qualification, any prayer whatsoever would count as an implicitly past-directed prayer.

We must be careful not to jump to conclusions here. From the mere fact that S is known to have obtained, one cannot deduce that future prayers for S make no contribution to S's obtaining. To see this point, it will be helpful to consider a slightly different scenario: one in which a prayer is offered for a *future* event that is already known to occur. In fact, we need not rely on hypotheticals here, because we can find a historical example of the latter in the biblical book of Daniel. In Daniel chapter 9 we read:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. (9:1-2)

Daniel is referring here to the prophecy delivered by Jeremiah several decades earlier.⁷ Undoubtedly he believed this to be a genuine prophecy that would not fail to come to pass. Yet his response to the prophecy was not to wait passively for it to be fulfilled, but rather to offer a lengthy and impassioned prayer of confession for sin and petition for God to show mercy to his people by bringing an end to their desolations—an end that had already been promised by God.

Evidently Daniel did not reason as follows:

God has promised that S will come to pass; therefore S will come to pass; therefore it is pointless for me to pray for S to come to pass.

Rather, he reasoned along these lines:

God has promised that S will come to pass; but God has also made clear that S will occur only if his people offer heartfelt prayers of confession for sin and pleas for mercy; therefore I should offer such prayers so that S will come to pass, just as God has promised it will.

In other words, Daniel apparently took his knowledge of Israel's future deliverance as a positive motivation to pray for that deliverance rather than a reason *not* to pray for it, because he understood that the certainty of the outcome did not entail that it wouldn't be an answer to *his* prayers.

⁷ See Jeremiah 25:8-14.

I see no reason why a parallel logic cannot be applied to PDPs. If it can make sense (at least in some cases) to pray for *future* states of affairs that one already knows God *will* bring about, it can also make sense (at least in some cases) to pray for *past* states of affairs that one already knows God *has* brought about, provided one believes that one's prayers contribute to God's bringing about those states of affairs. Already knowing that S has obtained in the past doesn't necessarily render incoherent a PDP that God have brought about S.

The other significant factor in considering whether PDPs make sense is whether God has the epistemic and metaphysical powers needed to answer such prayers. In order to answer a PDP at t_2 requesting that God bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 it seems clear that God must (i) know that the prayer will be offered at t_2 and (ii) have the ability to bring about S at t_1 given his knowledge of the prayer at t_2 . Whether or not these conditions can be met depends in turn on the extent of God's knowledge (specifically his knowledge of our future free choices) and his relationship to time. Historically, theists have held a range of positions on these issues, so in order to consider whether God can answer PDPs, we must consider the question with respect to each of the positions—or at least the major ones. The following survey closely follows Timpe's discussion, but with some additions and modifications.⁸

Augustinianism

Timpe's exploration of PDPs assumes an *incompatibilist* (libertarian) view of human freedom. This is understandable, given that Timpe himself holds that view and it may well be the majority view among theist philosophers today. There is, however, a prominent compatibilist tradition within Christian theism which affirms a strong view of divine sovereignty and predestination while insisting upon its compatibility with human freedom and moral responsibility. So it will be worthwhile to include the major representative of this tradition in our survey. For want of a better label, and without wading into any historical or exegetical debates, I will call this view "Augustinianism."

⁸ In each case the position under consideration will be assumed to be coherent on its own terms. The question at hand is not whether the position *itself* is coherent, but whether it can account for divine answers to PDPs on the assumption that it *is* coherent.

According to Augustinianism, God predetermines or foreordains all events within the creation according to an eternal decree which does not depend in any respect on the free choices of his creatures. God's decree does not depend on either foreknowledge of what his creatures *will in fact* freely choose or so-called "middle knowledge," that is, prior knowledge of what any particular creature *would* freely choose in any specific circumstances. For the Augustinian, creatures freely choose as they do because God has decreed that they will so choose, but their choices are still *their* choices and they are free in whatever respects are necessary for moral responsibility and significant personal relationships. Augustinians thus have a very strong view of divine providence and are committed to a compatibilist view of human freedom.

On the face of it, Augustinianism can easily accommodate divine answers to PDPs. God knows in advance what people will pray because ultimately he has *ordained* those prayers. And since he ordains all events, it is clearly within his power (i) to bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 and (ii) to bring it about that one or more petitioners pray at t_2 that he bring about S at t_1 . If there is a serious question here, it concerns whether God's bringing about S at t_1 can really be understood as an *answer* to the prayer at t_2 given that God himself foreordained the prayer. Can the Augustinian sensibly claim that S was brought about by God, at least in part, *because of* the prayer?

If this is a genuine problem for Augustinianism, it's a problem for *all* petitionary prayers, not merely past-directed ones. However, the problem is resolved once we posit that God observes orderly means-end relationships in his eternal decree. If God ordains all things then he ordains *both* the ends *and* the means to those ends, and he can establish orderly means-end relationships between events in his creation. Suppose God ordains that the Hebrew slaves will escape from the Egyptian army, and that they will do so by means of passing through a divided Red Sea. Even granting that God ordained the entire series of events, it still makes sense to say that the Hebrews escaped *because of* the parted sea and that the escape of the Hebrews was a *result* of the parted sea. Likewise, if God ordains that Mary recovers from an illness and that Sam prays for Mary to recover, that is consistent with Mary's recovery being a *result* of Sam's

prayer. There is no contradiction in saying that Mary recovered *because of* Sam's prayer.⁹ Note also that on the Augustinian view, all of the relevant counterfactuals turn out as expected. Just as the Augustinian can say, "If the Red Sea had not parted, the Hebrews would not have escaped," he can also say, "If Sam had not prayed, Mary would not have recovered." Thus if God can be said to answer *any* prayers on an Augustinian view, there's no reason to deny that he can answer *past-directed* prayers.

Molinism

Molinism is a theory designed to reconcile a strong view of divine providence, according to which God foreordains all things according to an eternal decree, with a strong view of human freedom: specifically, incompatibilist (libertarian) freedom. According to the Molinist, prior to his decree to create God possesses *middle knowledge*: knowledge of what any possible creaturely agent *would* freely choose in any specific set of circumstances. Thus for every creaturely agent *S*, and every fully specified set of circumstances *C*, God knows every subjunctive conditional of the form:

If *S* were in *C*, *S* would freely choose *A*.

On the basis of his middle knowledge God knows which possible worlds he *could* actualize by creating a particular set of free creatures and arranging for those free creatures to make their choices in specific sets of circumstances. Out of all the possible worlds he could actualize, God chooses (on the basis of various criteria) one particular world to actualize. Since God knows exactly what choices his creatures will make in that world, God possess comprehensive infallible foreknowledge of everything that will take place in the world.¹⁰

⁹ To be clear, "because of" carries here a broad explanatory sense rather than a narrow causal sense. The claim is not that Sam's prayer *caused* Mary's recovery (or caused God to bring about Mary's recovery) but that Sam's prayer constitutes part of the explanation for Mary's recovery.

¹⁰ Molinists have held different views on whether God himself is temporal, at least subsequent to creation. Those who hold that God transcends time will deny that God has *literal* foreknowledge (i.e., knowledge of the future). But all Molinists will agree that for every time *t*, God knows infallibly what takes place at *t*.

There has been endless debate over whether God *could* have the kind of middle knowledge on which Molinism depends. But for our purposes here we're assuming that Molinism is a coherent position. The question is whether Molinism can satisfactorily account for divine answers to PDPs.

Timpe, following Thomas Flint, argues that Molinism can do so. Suppose that God knows via his middle knowledge that if Sam were in C at t_2 then Sam would ask God to bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 , where t_1 is earlier than t_2 . There seems to be no reason why God could not actualize a world in which (i) he brings about S at t_1 and (ii) he arranges for Sam to be in C at t_2 . Moreover, his reasons for bringing about S at t_1 could include his knowledge that Sam in C at t_2 would pray for S at t_1 .¹¹

One complication here, which needs to be taken into account, is that C has to be a *fully specified* set of circumstances, and therefore C must include God's bringing about S at t_1 . But this need not present a problem provided that Sam would make the same decision to pray whether or not God brings about S at t_1 , i.e., provided that Sam's decision to pray is independent of the answer to his prayer. If Sam is ignorant of whether S obtained at t_1 and S's obtaining at t_1 has no significant effect on the immediate circumstances in which Sam makes his choice, it's reasonable to assume that Sam would choose the same way regardless of whether S obtains at t_1 .¹² So on the Molinist view there seems to be no reason why God could not answer PDPs.

¹¹ Objection: "On the Molinist account, God's reason for bringing about S at t_1 is not that Sam *will* pray in C at t_2 , but rather that Sam *would* pray in C at t_2 . So God is really acting in response to a counterfactual truth rather than a factual truth about Sam's prayer; that's to say, God isn't acting in answer to Sam's *actual* prayer." Strictly speaking, this is correct. But as in the Augustinian account, there's still a meaningful sense in which, according to God's ordering of means and ends, S is a *result* of Sam's prayer, and if Sam had not prayed, S would not have obtained.

¹² If, on the other hand, Sam knows that S obtained at t_1 , it's very likely that fact *will* influence his decision. But as I argued earlier, it doesn't follow that he'll decide *not* to pray. So it's still possible that the counterfactuals turn out in such a way that God can actualize a world in which Sam offers a PDP at t_2 and God answers it at t_1 .

Eternalism

Eternalism is the view that God transcends time and possesses a comprehensive immediate knowledge of what takes place in his creation at every time. God sees every event in the creation in “one eternal moment,” so to speak. On the eternalist view, God doesn’t *foreordain* all things, as he does on the Augustinian and Molinist views, nor does he have *foreknowledge* in the most literal sense of the term, since God doesn’t stand in any temporal relation to events in the creation. But God knows everything that is future *for us*, because God eternally knows what takes place at every time. Furthermore, although God *himself* is not in time, he can bring about *effects* in time. God can cause temporal events within the creation.¹³

Concerns have been raised over whether a timeless God can truly *respond* to events in the creation, including the prayers of his creatures. Advocates of eternalism such as Eleanor Stump have addressed such concerns.¹⁴ Timpe argues that if God can answer prayers *at all* on the eternalist view, there’s no reason to think he cannot answer *past-directed* prayers. If God can respond to a prayer offered at t_2 , that response could include bringing about some state of affairs S at t_1 , where t_1 is earlier than t_2 .

I believe Timpe is correct on this point, but there seems to be one oddity in the standard eternalist position that requires further thought. If God knows in “one eternal moment,” what takes place at every time, then in that “one eternal moment” God knows *both* what will happen at t_1 *and* what will happen at t_2 , in which case he knows what he will bring about at t_1 in response to the prayer at t_2 . How then could the prayer at t_2 serve as part of the *explanation* for what God brings about at t_1 ? It seems there needs to be an explanatory order from an event at t_2 to an event at t_1 as follows (where \rightarrow signifies “is part of the explanation for”):

[Sam prays at t_2] \rightarrow [God knows that Sam prays at t_2] \rightarrow [God brings about S at t_1]

God’s eternal knowledge is thus an intermediate point in the chain of explanation. But God’s knowledge that Sam prays at t_2 occurs in the *same eternal moment* as God’s knowledge that he

¹³ The version of eternalism considered here also affirms a libertarian view of human freedom.

¹⁴ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas, Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2003), 149–158.

brings about S at t_1 . So how could God's bringing about S at t_1 be *explanatorily subsequent* to God's *knowledge* that he brings about S at t_1 ?

In fact, this oddity applies equally to *non-past-directed* prayers, since the same problem would arise even if t_2 were temporarily prior to t_1 . The only way out for the eternalist, as far as I can see, is to posit that God's eternal knowledge does *not* consist in a single eternal moment, but rather in a *plurality* of eternal moments, such that there can be relations of explanatory order between those moments. In other words, the eternalist must concede that God's eternal knowledge is 'partitioned' in some fashion, in order that God's knowledge of what takes place at some time t_1 can explain (in part) what he brings about at some other (earlier or later) time t_2 , which in turn explains his knowledge of what takes place at t_2 . (Here I assume that on the eternalist view what *actually* takes place in the creation must be explanatorily prior to God's *knowledge* of what takes place in the creation, even in those instances where what actually takes place is partly an effect of divine actions.)

At any rate, we can say this much. The eternalist view holds that (i) God is atemporal, (ii) God has exhaustive knowledge of what takes place in time, and (iii) God can bring about events in time in response to other events in time. *If* this view is coherent—and for argument's sake we're assuming that each of the views considered is coherent on its own terms—then the eternalist view *can* account for divine answers to PDPs.

Simple Foreknowledge

The central difference between the eternalist view and the simple-foreknowledge view is that the latter takes God to be a *temporal* being. God is "within time" such that he experiences the passing of time and his actions take place in time (not merely the *effects* of his actions, as on the eternalist view). Even though God passes through time, God nevertheless has comprehensive infallible foreknowledge of future events on account of his essential omniscience. For any times t_1 and t_2 , where t_2 is later than t_1 , God knows at t_1 all that will happen at t_2 . (Exactly *how* God possesses such knowledge according to the simple-

foreknowledge view need not concern us here.) God's comprehensive foreknowledge is fully present at the very first moment of creation and indeed at every prior moment.¹⁵

Timpe argues that the simple-foreknowledge view can explain the efficacy of PDPs provided that free agents have "counterfactual power over certain of God's beliefs."¹⁶ Suppose that Sam performs some action A at t_2 . According to the simple-foreknowledge view, God believes (infallibly) at t_1 that S will do A at t_2 . Sam has counterfactual power at t_2 over God's belief at t_1 if Sam's having refrained from doing A at t_2 would have made it that God believed otherwise at t_1 (i.e., God would have believed that Sam will refrain from A at t_2). If Sam has such counterfactual power, this can explain how God's actions at t_1 (such as bringing about state of affairs S) can be a *response* to Sam's actions at t_2 (such as Sam praying for God to bring about S at t_1). Hence the simple-foreknowledge view can account for divine answers to PDPs.

Once again, I suggest matters are not so straightforward, for this scenario presents a similar oddity as that faced by the eternalist view. If God has comprehensive foreknowledge at every time t , there must be some time t_0 prior to t_1 at which God knows not only that Sam will pray at t_2 but also that he (God) will bring about S at t_1 . Both events are included in God's foreknowledge at t_0 . Indeed, there has *never* been a time at which that wasn't the case. But as in the eternalist scenario, Sam's praying at t_2 has to be *explanatorily prior* to God's bringing about S at t_1 , and thus God's *foreknowledge* of what takes place at t_2 has to be explanatorily prior to his foreknowledge of what takes place at t_1 .

What this suggests is that God's foreknowledge cannot be *simple* in the sense that it lacks any internal explanatory order. The timeworn metaphor of God "looking down the corridors of time" and seeing all future events in one simple moment of foreknowledge cannot be correct if God is able to answer PDPs. Instead, like the eternalist, the simple-foreknowledge advocate must posit some kind of 'partitioning' within God's foreknowledge. To use a crude metaphor: God must "cover one eye" when looking into the future. Specifically, in order for God to answer at t_1 a prayer at t_2 , he must in some sense withhold his foreknowledge of what takes place at t_1

¹⁵ If God is essentially temporal and has no beginning or end, it follows that there must be an infinite number of past moments as well as an infinite number of future moments.

¹⁶ Timpe, "Prayers for the Past," 311.

(or at least some relevant subset of what takes place) until he has foreknowledge of what takes place at t_2 . Once God foreknows that Sam will pray at t_2 for God to bring about S at t_1 , and has decided to answer Sam's prayer, then God's foreknowledge of what takes place at t_1 can "fall into place," so to speak.¹⁷

While I harbor some doubts about whether this partitioning model is coherent, it doesn't strike me as clearly incoherent. At any rate, if it is possible on the simple-foreknowledge view for God to bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 on the basis of his foreknowledge of a prayer at t_2 for him to do so, then it seems that the simple-foreknowledge view can account for divine answers to PDPs.

Open Theism

Open theism, as I define it here, affirms the following three propositions: (1) God is temporal; (2) humans have libertarian free will; and (3) God does not foreknow the free choices of humans. On the open theist view, God possesses *some* foreknowledge, namely, foreknowledge of events that do not depend on (future) human free choices (e.g., a particular speck of cosmic dust at the edge of the galaxy floating to a certain position three weeks from now). But the relevant point here is that God lacks foreknowledge of human free choices.¹⁸

It seems obvious that the open theist will struggle to explain how God could answer past-directed prayers. In order for God to bring about S at t_1 in response to Sam's prayer at t_2 (where t_2 is later than t_1) God needs to know at t_1 that Sam will pray that specific prayer at t_2 . But on

¹⁷ The words 'until', 'once', and 'then' speak of logical or explanatory priority rather than temporal priority. I do not argue that on the simple-foreknowledge view God's foreknowledge cannot be complete at any one *temporal* moment.

¹⁸ Timpe identifies open theism with the view that there are no true propositions about future free choices (such propositions either being false or lacking any truth value). Timpe, "Prayers for the Past," 316. However, some self-identified open theists, such as William Hasker and Richard Swinburne, take the view that there are such true propositions (but God cannot know them). William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 123–125; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 167–183.

the open theist view, God doesn't know at t_1 that Sam will pray that prayer at t_2 —at least if Sam's prayer is offered *freely*.

The open theist might be tempted to reply, "It's true that God cannot *know* that Sam will pray at t_2 . But God can *reasonably believe* that Sam will pray at t_2 (or around that time) based on his knowledge of the *probability* that Sam will pray at t_2 . So perhaps God brings about S at t_1 because he reasonably believes that Sam will pray at t_2 ."¹⁹ The flaw in this response is that God's bringing about S at t_1 wouldn't be a response to the *future fact* of Sam's prayer but merely a response to the *present probability* of Sam's prayer, which is a very different thing. There is no causal or even counterfactual connection between God's action and Sam's prayer. The basis for God's action is not Sam's *actual praying* but rather a set of probabilities that hold *regardless of whether Sam actually prays*. As such, God's bringing about S at t_1 can't be plausibly interpreted as an *answer* to Sam's prayer at t_2 .²⁰ It would be a pseudo-answer at best. I therefore concur with Timpe's conclusion that open theism "cannot account for the efficacy of past-directed impetratory prayers."²¹

3. A Deductive Argument against Open Theism

Of the five major views on divine providence, divine foreknowledge, and God's relation to time, it appears that only open theism lacks the resources to give a plausible account of how God could answer PDPs. Thus it appears that if open theism were true, there would be no divinely answered PDPs. (Of course, PDPs could still be *offered* if open theism were true; the point is that no PDPs could be answered by God.) If none of the major views could account for answers to PDPs, there would be no special problem for open theism. But since the other views *can* offer plausible accounts, it follows that if we have reason to believe that PDPs *could* be

¹⁹ It's important to note that on this view God must reasonably believe not only *that* Sam will pray at t_2 but also *what* Sam will pray; in other words, God needs to reliably predict the *content* of the prayer as well. We will return to this point later.

²⁰ Timpe argues that (on the open theist view) God's actions at t_1 could not be a response to a prayer at t_2 "because prior to t_2 there was no fact of the matter" about what the person who prayed would do at t_2 . But as I noted earlier (footnote 18) some open theists believe there *is* a fact of the matter about future free choices.

²¹ Timpe, "Prayers for the Past," 317.

answered—perhaps because we have reason to believe that PDPs *have* been answered—that presents a unique challenge to open theism.²²

Let us now assume, purely for the sake of argument, that we have good evidence that there have been instances of divinely answered past-directed prayers. (We will consider later on whether in fact there is any good evidence of such prayers.) It would be tempting to mount the following deductive argument:

- (1) If open theism were true, there would be no instances of answered PDPs.
- (2) There are instances of answered PDPs.
- (3) Therefore, open theism is not true.

The argument is deductively valid, so the open theist must challenge at least one of the premises. Here is one way in which (2) could be challenged. The open theist could argue that our evidence *appears* to support (2), but that evidence is also logically consistent with the falsity of (2). As I noted earlier, on the open theist view God could bring about states-of-affairs based on fallible predictions of how people will pray in the future, although those wouldn't properly count as *answers* to prayers. Nevertheless, the open theist might argue, such scenarios would be *empirically indistinguishable* from answers to prayers. For all intents and purposes it would *look to us* as though God had foreseen those prayers and answered them in advance. So any evidence offered in support of (2) would be ambiguous in that regard.

It's true that any empirical evidence for answered PDPs would also be consistent with the open theist's alternative explanation. Even so, that alternative explanation is less than fully satisfying. Surely the most *natural* response to such events would be to conclude that God had in fact foreseen and answered the prayers. The open theist's explanation seems *ad hoc* and therefore less plausible in principle. It also raises the following worry: if God *were* to act as the open theist here suggests, he would be guilty of misleading people (or of allowing them to be

²² As noted earlier (footnote 8) I have assumed throughout that the other positions are coherent. An open theist might object that the alternatives to open theism can offer plausible accounts of PDPs *only if they are coherent*, but none of them is coherent (so claims the open theist). However, it would be a tall order indeed to show that *none* of the alternatives to open theism is coherent; that would amount to showing that open theism necessarily follows from theism *simpliciter*.

misled) into believing that he has foreknowledge of their free choices. Presumably the God of open theism would not want people to be so misled. If open theism were true, we would expect God not to act in such a way as to give people the impression that open theism is *not* true.

Another challenge to (2) would be to argue that what appear to be answers to PDPs are merely fortuitous coincidences. According to this response, if Sam prays at t_2 for God to bring about state of affairs S at t_1 , and it turns out that S obtained at t_1 , the explanation for S's obtaining is *not* that God brought about S because he fallibly predicted that Sam would pray at t_2 . Instead, either God brought about S for some *other* reason (having nothing to do with Sam praying at t_2) or S came about via natural rather than supernatural means. But either would *look to us* like a divine answer to Sam's prayer at t_2 .

This challenge to (2) has some mileage in principle, but the devil is in the details. Its plausibility will depend on the actual evidence offered in support of (2). If the PDPs are very specific in their content, and the states of affairs requested are highly unlikely to have obtained in the natural course of events, it won't be plausible to chalk things up to coincidence. However, since we are postponing for now consideration of the actual evidence for answered PDPs, let us simply note that this response offers another escape route from the deductive argument by challenging the grounds for (2).

What scope does the open theist have for challenging (1)? As we concluded from the survey in the previous section, there is good reason to accept (1) because God's ability to answer PDPs depends crucially on his having foreknowledge of future free choices. However, the open theist may have a way out here too. Although the open theist is committed to humans possessing libertarian free will, she could appeal to the concept of "will-setting" in order to argue that God can foreknow *some* future free choices.²³ The idea here is that an agent S can make free choices prior to t_1 that 'set' his will in such a way that S's choice at t_1 is actually fixed (i.e., S could not have chosen otherwise at t_1). Such a choice can still be regarded as free in an important sense,

²³ Robert Kane, "Free Will, Responsibility and Will-Setting," *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 67–90; Robert Kane, "Some Neglected Pathways in the Free Will Labyrinth," in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 406–37.

and S can be held morally responsible for it, because that choice can be traced to prior *undetermined* free choices. The choice is said to be *derivatively* free. Any derivatively free choice must be dependent on one or more prior *non-derivatively* free choices.

The open theist could therefore argue that God can infallibly foreknow *derivatively* free choices, and thus God could answer *some* PDPs, namely, those offered by derivatively free choice. Consider a situation in which Sam prior to t_1 makes some will-setting free choices, such that his will becomes 'set' with respect to how he prays. It is possible that at t_1 God foreknows that Sam will pray in a particular way at some later time t_2 . (Note that t_2 need not be an exact time: the open theist doesn't need God to know *exactly* when Sam will pray, only that he *will* pray at some future time.) God could then bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 in answer to Sam's as-yet-future prayer.

If the concepts of will-setting and derivatively free choices are coherent (and I will not dispute them here) then this proposal offers a way for the open theist to defuse the deductive argument. The first premise of the argument makes a strong claim, and the scenario sketched above shows that we have good reason to reject it. An open theist who allows for PDPs arising from prior will-setting choices can account for answers to those prayers. As such, I conclude that the deductive argument against open theism fails.²⁴

4. An Evidential Argument against Open Theism

The problem with the deductive argument is that it is too ambitious. But in light of the difficulties faced by open theism in accounting for answers to PDPs, a less ambitious *evidential*

²⁴ There is another way in which, given open theism, God could *appear* to answer PDPs, namely, by 'fixing' prayers so that they correspond to prior events brought about by God. For example, God could bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 and then somehow ensure that Sam prays at t_2 for God to have brought about S at t_1 (e.g., by impressing certain thoughts on Sam or by directly influencing his will). I assume open theists will not find this an attractive explanation, since on open theist assumptions it would involve both divine deception and divine coercion.

argument can be developed. The argument could be formulated in a number of ways (e.g., as a Bayesian argument) but here I offer an argument via inference to the best explanation.²⁵

As we've seen, the open theist could offer several distinct explanations for what *appear* to be divine answers to PDPs. One explanation is that God foreknew the prayers because the choices of those who prayed were only derivatively free; they were fixed by prior non-derivatively free choices. Another explanation is that God brought about the states of affairs requested in the prayers based on fallible (but reliable) predictions. A further explanation is that the states of affairs requested in the prayers obtained by sheer coincidence.

The trouble with these explanations, however, is that they aren't *good* explanations. If we find that there are *many* instances of apparent answers to PDPs, it becomes far less plausible to claim that they're mere coincidences, or that God is in the habit of acting on the basis of fallible predictions of PDPs (despite its tendency to mislead people about his abilities), or that the PDPs were offered on the basis of choices fixed by prior will-setting decisions. In addition, the more *specific* the PDPs, the less plausible all of these explanations become. This is most obviously true for the coincidence explanation, but it is also true for the other two. A very specific prayer would be far more difficult to predict accurately on the basis of merely probabilistic knowledge about a person's character, inclinations, past experiences, and so forth. And while the idea of a *generally* settled will is plausible (i.e., a will-setting which determines that a person will always make certain *kinds* of choices in the future) it stretches credibility to think that a person could make will-setting choices that would inevitably result in a very specific prayer being offered at some point in the future, unless the prayer comes right on the heels of those will-setting choices.

Contrast these with the far simpler and less *ad hoc* explanation that these apparent answers to PDPs *really are* answers to PDPs, and that God is able to answer such prayers because he possesses comprehensive infallible foreknowledge of the future free choices of his creatures. Armed with this observation, we can formulate the following evidential argument:

- (1) There *appear* to be answers to PDPs.²⁶

²⁵ Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed., International Library of Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2004).

(2) The best explanation for (1) is that God has foreknowledge of future free choices and he sometimes answers PDPs on the basis of his foreknowledge.²⁷

(3) Therefore, God has foreknowledge of future free choices and he sometimes answers PDPs on the basis of his foreknowledge.

(4) Therefore, open theism is false.

The inferring of (3) from (1) and (2) is a case of *defeasible* reasoning. Clearly (3) isn't *entailed* by (1) and (2). But if both (1) and (2) are true, we have good reason to think that (3) is also true. And (4) is entailed by (3).

Our earlier survey of the different positions on God's foreknowledge and relationship to time, and the extent to which they can account for answers to PDPs, lends considerable support to (2). But what about (1)? Is there any evidence of answers to PDPs?

5. Has God Answered Past-Directed Prayers?

Our conclusion to this point is a conditional one: *if* there appear to be answers to PDPs, that is evidence against open theism. This in itself is a significant conclusion. Most arguments against open theism are philosophical or theological in nature. But here we have the prospect of an *empirical evidential* argument against open theism. If open theism were true, we would not expect to observe certain things; so if we do observe them, we have empirical evidence against open theism.

Before we consider some apparent cases of answered PDPs, we should reflect briefly on the appropriate criteria for *identifying* answered PDPs. Suppose I pray today and ask God to have brought it about that it rained in Edinburgh yesterday. (Assume that at the time I pray, I don't know whether it rained in Edinburgh yesterday.) After praying, I check the weather report and discover that it *did* rain in Edinburgh yesterday. If answers to PDPs are possible in principle, it's at least possible that God brought about rain in Edinburgh yesterday partly in answer to my prayer today. But our grounds for drawing that conclusion are shaky to say the least, simply

²⁶ The first premise must be stated in terms of appearances so as not to beg the question against the open theist.

²⁷ Obviously the argument takes the existence of God for granted—a justifiable assumption given the dialectical context in which the argument is offered.

because it regularly rains in Edinburgh anyway. Most of us would reasonably conclude that this was sheer coincidence.

What criteria would need to be fulfilled in order for us to reasonably conclude that a PDP had been answered? I suggest the following conditions would need to be met:

- (1) Some petitioner P prayed at t_2 either (a) for God to bring about some state of affairs S at t_1 , where t_1 is earlier than t_2 , or (b) for God to bring about some state of affairs S^* , such that God's bringing about S^* would require God to bring about some prior state of affairs S at t_1 , where t_1 is earlier than t_2 .
- (2) S obtained at t_1 .
- (3) P did not know at t_2 that S obtained at t_1 .
- (4) It's unlikely that S would have obtained at t_1 in the normal course of events.
- (5) God's bringing about S at t_1 in answer to P's prayer is consistent with what we know about God's character and purposes.

The first condition simply corresponds to the definition of a PDP (allowing for both explicitly and implicitly past-directed prayers). After all, we can reasonably conclude that a PDP has been *answered* only if a PDP has been *offered*. The third condition is necessary to exclude cases in which P prays for God to have brought about S while knowing already that S has obtained; in such cases it would be more reasonable to conclude that P's prayer has been conditioned by that prior knowledge. In other words, it would be more likely that the prayer was fitted (by P) to the prior state of affairs than that the prior state of affairs was fitted (by God) to the prayer.

I assume the rationales for the other conditions are obvious enough. Note that the second condition does *not* require a supernatural intervention by God or a violation of the laws of nature. For example, P might have prayed for his friend to have won the lottery yesterday. All else being equal, it's unlikely that his friend would have won the lottery.²⁸ But there's nothing *necessarily* supernatural or miraculous about his friend winning the lottery.²⁹

²⁸ Of course, it's not unlikely for *someone* to win the lottery, but the probability of any *specific* player winning is very low. The specificity of the prayer is a key factor here.

²⁹ Whether the friend's winning the lottery is consistent with what we know about God's character and purposes is another matter.

With these criteria before us, let us now consider some cases of apparent answers to PDPs. One fairly well-known case comes from the testimony of Helen Roseveare, who served as a medical missionary in Central Africa. While Roseveare was working in a labor ward, a woman died after giving birth prematurely, leaving behind a tiny baby and her two-year-old sister. The hospital had no incubator and no special feeding facilities. Although they were located on the equator, the hospital rooms were prone to chilly drafts at night, which threatened the life of the baby, and their last remaining water bottle burst while it was being filled. The following day, Roseveare related the desperate situation to some of the orphanage children. One of the children, a ten-year-old girl by the name of Ruth, offered a very specific and remarkably audacious prayer:

“Please God,” she prayed, “send us a hot water bottle. It’ll be no good tomorrow, God, as the baby’ll be dead; so please send it this afternoon. ... And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl, so she’ll know You really love her?”³⁰

Roseveare confesses that at the time she found it hard to “Amen” the prayer:

The only way God *could* answer this particular prayer would be by sending me a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, never received a parcel from home; anyway, if anyone *did* send me a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!³¹

Nevertheless, according to her own testimony, she received a parcel at her house that very afternoon containing various items including “a brand-new, rubber, hot water bottle” and “a small, beautifully dressed dolly.” The parcel had been mailed five months earlier. Roseveare herself had no doubt that this was a divine answer to Ruth’s prayer.³²

A second case comes from Edith Schaeffer’s book *L’Abri*. Schaeffer recounts the occasion when she and her husband were threatened with eviction from Switzerland and an abrupt end

³⁰ Helen M. Roseveare, *Living Faith* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Clearly the credibility of this story hangs on the credibility of Roseveare as a witness, but I see no reason to question her credibility as a witness or the historicity of this account.

to their ministry in that country unless they could find a home of their own to live in. Having no money to buy a home, they looked for places to rent, but even those proved too expensive for them. When the last day for them to find a home arrived, Schaeffer was told about one in a nearby town that would be perfect for their ministry needs. Unfortunately, she discovered it was only for sale, not for rent. She then relates how she turned in desperation to God in prayer:

As I asked for God's guidance concerning the chalet which had seemed such an exciting answer to prayer that afternoon and now seemed so impossible, my own logical sequence of thought brought me to begin a sentence in which I expected to ask that the owner change his mind and let it. It was after a length of time during which I had been inwardly struggling for reality in my sincerity of wanting God's will, when I came to this specific request concerning the chalet. It was then that suddenly I became flooded with a surge of assurance that God can do anything, nothing is impossible with Him. My sentence changed in the middle, and I ended my prayer with a definite plea, which even startled me as I said it, "Oh, please show us Thy will about this house tomorrow, and if we are to *buy* it, send us a sign that will be clear enough to convince Fran as well as me, send us one thousand dollars before ten o'clock tomorrow morning."³³

Early the following morning the Schaeffers received three letters in the mail. One was from a couple in the United States who had followed their ministry with interest. Three months earlier, the husband had unexpectedly received a sum of money from his employer. The couple had debated what do with it, eventually deciding they should "give it to the Lord's work." Specifically, they decided to send it to the Schaeffers to "buy a house somewhere that will always be open to young people."³⁴ The amount was exactly one thousand dollars. Note that the answer to the prayer—or at least key elements of it—occurred weeks, even months, before the prayer itself was offered (and before the circumstances which gave rise to the prayer). The prayer was specific, and the apparent answer was precise in its timing and its content.

A third case comes from my own circle of acquaintances. A former student reported an occasion when she was working for a mission agency and was informed that her support account was in deficit, with the implication that she would not be paid. She sat down and

³³ Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1969), 96–97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

determined precisely what would be needed to bring the account back to balance and prayed for the Lord to provide it. Two days later, she received a check for that exact amount. The significant factor here is that the church group who had sent her the money had decided to do so days before she knew that she would need it.

I suspect there are many more stories like this to be told. Indeed, I would wager that a significant proportion of ‘regular’ answers to prayer will, on closer examination, turn out to be cases of implicitly past-directed prayers, since the answers to those prayers needed to be “set in motion” well before the prayers were offered.³⁵

6. Conclusion

I have argued that open theism faces considerable difficulties in accounting for answers to PDPs. While open theists do have some options available for explaining (or perhaps explaining away) apparent answers to PDPs, these explanations are generally implausible and *ad hoc*. If open theism were true, we would not *expect* to see apparent answers to PDPs, and therefore any apparent answers to PDPs serve as evidence against open theism. In at least one respect, then, open theism is susceptible to empirical disconfirmation. Furthermore, there appear to be actual cases of answered PDPs. While I have related only a few examples in this paper, I suspect that a more thorough and rigorous investigation would uncover many more examples.

Even if there are apparent cases of answered PDPs and these constitute evidence against open theism, it doesn’t follow that this evidence gives open theists a defeater for their beliefs about divine providence and foreknowledge. Nevertheless, such evidence could contribute to a cumulative case argument against open theism which draws on a combination of theological, philosophical, and empirical considerations. If nothing else, apparent answers to past-directed prayers should give open theists pause for thought.

³⁵ It’s also worth observing that in many cases—perhaps even the majority of cases—the answers to such prayers involve the free choices of human agents other than the ones offering the prayers. Certainly that is so for the three cases cited here. Assuming that God must somehow coordinate those free choices in order to answer the prayer, these cases present an additional challenge for open theism, given its weak account of divine providence.