

Comments on Saul Smilansky,
"A Problem about the Morality of Some Common forms of Prayer"

Scott A. Davison
Morehead State University

I agree with Professor Smilansky that some common forms of prayer are morally problematic. He describes three cases in which prayers are "aimed at furthering a certain goal, whose achievement is believed to entail or depend, beyond any reasonable doubt, on an undeserved death." There are also many prayers for less drastic outcomes that seem morally problematic for similar reasons, such as a child's prayer that a rival playmate trip and fall.

But why exactly does Smilansky believe that such prayers are morally problematic? There seem to be two independent reasons. About the case of a woman "pushing pins into a voodoo doll with the full belief that the victim represented by the doll will die as a result," he says that "What matters to us when we wish to evaluate this woman morally is not so much whether we believe that the practice she is engaged in makes sense, but what the woman believes herself to be doing." And then later in the paper, he says that

What we care about, when morally evaluating people who pray, is primarily subjective rationality: whether the praying agents themselves think that there is a real chance that their prayers will achieve their goals, so that, through prayer, they will have made a difference, and God will deliver what they are asking for.

This is Smilansky's first reason for thinking that these prayers are morally problematic: roughly, that in such cases, the agents think that what they are doing has a real chance of achieving an end that they believe would be bad on the whole (but perhaps good for them). This is the point of saying, in his original three cases, that they each involve an "undeserved death."

To me, this seems to be more about the evaluation of persons or intentions or characters than about the evaluation of actions. For example, the woman who believes, falsely, that she is inflicting harm on someone by pushing pins into a voodoo doll is not actually doing any harm, objectively speaking, but she is a bad person. If God does not exist, or does not answer prayers, then people who offer prayers like the ones Smilansky describes are in exactly the same position.

There is a difference, though, between saying that these people are bad people, or have bad intentions, or bad characters, on the one hand, and saying that they would be morally responsible for the outcome if such prayers were answered, on the other hand. (1) Suppose that from pure spite, I kill my innocent friend with my bare hands. I am a bad person, and I have done an awful thing (namely, killing my innocent friend). (2) Suppose instead that from pure spite, I hire a hit man to kill my innocent friend. Again, I am a bad person, and I have done an awful thing (namely, paying someone to kill my innocent friend). (3) Suppose again that from pure spite, I ask my neighbor to kill my innocent friend, and my neighbor agrees to do this, but only because my neighbor is also filled with pure spite toward my friend. Once again, I am a bad person, and I have done an awful thing (namely, inciting someone to kill my innocent friend), but I am less morally responsible for my friend's death in this case than I was in cases

(1) or (2). This is because in general, one's degree of moral responsibility for a given outcome depends on the extent of one's intention, foresight, and degree of causal contribution.

Finally, (4) suppose that from pure spite, I pray that God would kill my innocent friend, and God does, partly because I ask and partly for God's own reasons (which reasons, we may suppose for the sake of the example, are entirely good ones). Once more, I am a bad person, and I have done an awful thing (namely, pray for the death of an innocent person), but I am less morally responsible in this case than in case (3). This is because my degree of causal contribution to God's action is less than my degree of causal contribution in case (3) (not to mention any differences in foresight, a point to which I shall return in a moment).

So although I accept Smilansky's general point that it is morally problematic to pray for things that one takes to be bad on the whole, I think it is important to clarify exactly what is morally problematic about this. We can say that these people are bad people, and have bad intentions, and bad characters, but it is less clear to what degree they would be morally responsible for the outcome if such prayers were answered. (For more on the issue of responsibility for answered prayers, see "On the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer: Response to Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011), pp.227-37.)

This point is reinforced by concerns that Smilansky himself raises with regard to the question of the actual evidence for God's benevolence and power:

Many people think that their prayers may be efficacious, but they are not certain about the moral nature of the supernatural being (or about the level of intervention in the world he chooses to exercise, and the like). Since the evidence for the claim that, if there is a God, he is supremely good and omnipotent seems to be less than conclusive, such a sense of uncertainty should, arguably, be general. Hence, to pray for divine intervention in a direction that, in itself, one perceives as morally problematic (i.e. as likely to involve the sacrifice of innocent people), just because God will be there to block one's prayer from obtaining if it is morally inappropriate – seems unacceptable.

This argument is designed to answer the objection that often people pray for things that they take to be bad on the whole with a kind of "moral escape clause," assuming that God would answer such prayers only if, somehow, the things requested were actually good on the whole, contrary to appearances. Here Smilansky shifts ground from the question of the subjective rationality of the agents in question to the objective rationality of those same agents. I don't want to go into this subject here, but it is worth noting that if Smilansky is right to suggest that believers are not entitled to hold that God is omnipotent, then they are also not entitled to hold that their prayers can make a difference, which means that their responsibility for the outcome (should the prayer be answered) is also diminished.

It seems to me that the best reply to the "moral escape clause" idea is the other one that Smilansky himself mentions, namely, that there are just too many clear cases of prayers for apparently bad things that do not involve any such beliefs or qualifications. And this brings us to Smilansky's second argument for the conclusion that such prayers are morally problematic,

which relies implicitly on some kind of principle like the following one: “If it would be morally problematic for a person to bring about some event E on her own, then it would be morally problematic for this person to ask God to bring about E.” Here I am inclined to say that this principle is not always true, because there are at least some cases in which people pray with the “moral escape clause,” even if this is not typical. In those cases, it seems to me, there could be a difference between bringing about E on my own and asking God to bring about E.

On the whole, though, as I said at the beginning, I believe that Professor Smilansky is right to point out that certain prayers are morally problematic, and I agree with some of his reasons for saying this.