

On the Value of Prayer

One of my best friends, whom I have known since childhood, recently published a book on faith and atheism, which I read. We then had a lengthy discussion on these matters. One of his main assertions, to which I acceded *ex ante*, is that faith is a flawed epistemology which is not a reliable path to knowledge. He said that very few of his interlocutors had ever conceded this point, and that my intellectual position was very uncommon. Faith is too broad a topic for this short essay, so I will concentrate here on prayer.

I am not a religious man. I am, however, a spiritual man, and one who has made pilgrimages of the spirit and of the body, sometimes in extremely arduous conditions. I take these questions seriously. I do not see prayer as a way of approaching God, whose existence I have no desire to affirm to others, nor do I see it as a path to knowledge. Even less do I see it as a way of gaining material benefits. I have nothing but the utmost disdain for the myriads who pray that God (or more often in this case, Jesus) will help them buy a new car, get a good grade on an exam, or, appallingly base goal for God, buy an iPhone. Yet beyond all of this consumerist “religion”, is it actually possible that prayer could have a benefit for human beings? I believe that this is possible, and that prayer indeed does benefit those who practice it.

The act of prayer is an experience in humility. It is a recognition that many events and situations are completely beyond our control. There are, of course, other manners to realize this humility—dependency on external conditions such as the weather is a clear example. Storms while sailing or camping, rockfall while climbing, and avalanches while off-piste skiing come to mind. But prayer is an externalized recognition and acceptance that *I am not in control*, that *I am not master of my environment*, that *I am, in fact, dependent*. This act of humility is salutary. In our modern society, especially for city dwellers who take little part in the glorious randomness of nature, one could almost be forgiven for believing that we humans control everything. But this is simply false. And prayer allows us to recognize this, making us better people.

Prayer is also a recognition and espousal of subjectivity, our subjectivity, and of our own intrinsic value. In ancient times, gods were personal entities, who would take sides in war, favoring the army of their worshippers against their enemies. Modern, religions lay claim to a universal morality which applies to everyone, though

the societies in which those religions are harbored have remained, more or less, pagan in their subjectivity, valuing one of “our” lives far more highly than one of “theirs”. Yet in prayer we are openly espousing subjectivity, stating that we believe in our own value more than the value of unknown strangers, that we believe that it is important that a rock not fall on *us*, that an avalanche not sweep away *our lives*, that accidents of life, which statistically must befall some children, do not befall *ours*. This recognition of subjectivity is also beneficial to us, as it returns our mind to the primitive state of self-awareness, recognition of our primordial place in the world.

Prayer also can provide us with comfort. It does this by necessarily taking the position that some entity out there, God, actually cares about us. This is related to the espousal of our own subjective value, but is not identical. A person who prays on his or her deathbed asks perhaps for forgiveness, perhaps for understanding, perhaps for courage to face death, perhaps for the health and safety of the loved ones who will perish. But whatever the prayer’s objective, the person praying believes that there is an entity at the other end of the conversation who cares. This is an affirmation of the goodness of life, perhaps false, but one which provides comfort.

Finally, prayer is beneficial because a thoughtful and able person will want to use it sparingly. Praying for an iPhone is the desperate action of an archetypical loser. One can work to get an iPhone. Prayer is not necessary. The consideration of that which I can achieve by myself, on my own resources, and that for which I may need (Divine) assistance, is a worthwhile intellectual and spiritual exercise. One of the first realizations to which it leads is that the most fundamental goods are at least partially beyond our control (innate abilities, health, avoidance of accidents, personal predispositions, the actions of others, even close others...). Determining what to pray for and what to leave to our own abilities can help us better understand life and our position in it.

In conclusion, I believe that there is a place for prayer. Humility, the subjective value we place on ourselves, comfort, and understanding can all be enhanced by it. Nor does it seem to have any serious undesirable effects which could counterbalance these positive ones. In the Qur’an, it says *Walk not upon the earth with insolence: for thou canst not rend the earth asunder, nor equal the mountains in height*. Prayer can help us to honor this imperative.