THIS IS A DRAFT! PLEASE DO NOT CITE.

WHEN CITING **ALWAYS** REFER TO THE FINAL VERSION PUBLISHED IN
EUROPEAN JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION, VOL. 10, NO. 2., PP. N–NN
WITH DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498

PLEASE DO NOT CITE. CITABLE VERSION HAS DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498

REQUESTS AND RESPONSES: REPLY TO COHOE

SCOTT A. DAVISON
MOREHEAD STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

Since you are reading this, I assume you have some interest in petitionary prayer and you have just read Professor Cohoe's remarks[1] concerning my short book on the same subject. If I were you and I had only this information, I might not even bother reading my book, because nearly everything Professor Cohoe says about it is negative. I think this would be unfortunate, for a number of reasons. For one thing, my book is designed to encourage further work in this area by providing a framework for approaching the issues, along with a novel defense and some new twists on old challenges. But it is not designed to say everything that could be said on the subject, or to settle questions once and for all (as I indicated clearly in my Introduction to the book). Some of the things Professor Cohoe says about my book by way of criticism strike me as identifying promising new lines of inquiry, rather than identifying shortcomings in my book. For another thing, some of the things Professor Cohoe says seem misleading, at least to me. Let me explain.

I should hasten to add that I am grateful for Professor Cohoe's detailed remarks concerning my book. I have always admired his previous work in this area; if you have not read it already, I recommend reading Cohoe 2014, an article that came to my attention too late in the process of writing my book for me to consider (unfortunately).

In my book, I discuss at length the question of what it means to say that God has answered a petitionary prayer. This is an important question, it seems to me, that has not received adequate attention in the literature. In the book, I developed and defended an account that I called the "Contrastive Reasons Account":

> CRA: S's petitionary prayer (token) for an object E is answered by God if and only if God's desire to bring about E just because S requested it plays an essential role in a true contrastive explanation of God's bringing about E rather than not. (Davison 2017, 38)

Professor Cohoe says that this account "has problems even in the case of human requests", but it is not designed to handle cases of human requests – it is an account concerning God and petitionary prayer, nothing else. Even though I discuss cases involving human requests in developing the account at the beginning of my discussion, the account is subsequently refined in light of difficulties that arise only in the case of divine replies to requests. So it is no strike against my account, it seems to me, that it fails to explain how requests work among human beings, and the arguments Professor Cohoe raises against it seem to rely on cases involving human beings.

Professor Cohoe says that "Davison's emphasis on the request having an 'essential role in a true contrastive explanation' is supposed to be motivated by cases where a request for an action provides a reason, but not the one that actually explains or motivates the action", but this is only partly correct. The main motivation for that requirement is to exclude cases in which petitionary prayer clearly makes no

1 Caleb M. Cohoe, "How Could Prayer Make a Difference? Discussion of Scott A. Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*". *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2018): 171–185. If not differently indicated, references are to this paper.

ejpr DRAFT

This is a Draft! Please do not Cite.

difference to God, because God would have done exactly the same thing, for the same reasons, had the prayer never been offered.

Professor Cohoe thinks more light can be shed on this issue by appealing to Joshua Gert's distinction between reasons providing requiring weight as opposed to justifying weight, and says that I owe the reader a defense of the idea that reasons have weight that can be summed. But he doesn't explain how these questions about human reasons translate into a proper understanding of divine reasons. I suggest that this is an area in which further work needs to be done (see Rice 2016, for example), but it is not at all clear that divine reasons should be understood along the lines suggested by Gert: should we really say that God is subject to criticism if God has a requiring reason, for example? Criticism by whom?

Cohoe adds that

> Davison's account allows for prayer to be efficacious either when it provides the only reason for God to bring something about or when it adds significant weight to reasons that would not be conclusive on their own. He denies, however, that prayer can be effective in any case in which God already has conclusive reasons for bringing about the object of prayer. (173)

I do not deny this, though; in fact, I express puzzlement about what is possible here, and I admit the possibility that there could be more than one true contrastive explanation of God's action (that is the point of saying, in the CRA, that a petitionary prayer plays an essential role in *a* true contrastive explanation of God's bringing about E rather than not, as opposed to saying that this plays a role in *every" true contrastive explanation: see Davison 2017, 38-42).

Cohoe continues:

> This is wrong. If a request is sufficient to move me to some action, then my action is done in response to that action, regardless of how many or how weighty my other reasons for performing that action are. (173)

Of course what he says here is true, and perhaps we should say the same things about God. But notice that in this statement, Professor Cohoe assumes as clear and unproblematic the concept of a request being sufficient to move me to action, and the concept of an action being done in response to a reason. But these are exactly the concepts I was trying to explicate, in the case of God, when developing the CRA. What would be helpful here would be an alternative account of what it means to say that God has answered a prayer – more generally, what precisely does it mean to say that a reason was sufficient to move God to action in such cases?

Cohoe further claims that my account "struggles when there are multiple reasons pulling in the same direction, each of which would be sufficient on its own to motivate action." He says this:

> What moves me to teach my students? On Davison's picture, my actions can express my care for my students or my love of wisdom (or maybe just my desire for continuing employment) but not both. More fundamentally, can we do something for the sake of our own happiness and also for the sake of love of God? If we accept Davison's suggestion, then it looks like our actions will turn out, in fact, to be done for only one of these reasons. (173)

As I explained before, I was not trying to provide an account that would shed light on why human beings act for reasons in general. I see no reason to think that a successful model for explaining human action for reasons will apply straightforwardly to cases involving divine action for reasons. And I do not rule out the possibility that God could act for more than one conclusive reason; in fact, I am clearly officially neutral about this question, and I claim that my account is neutral, too, after mentioning considerations on both sides of the question (Davison 2017, 42). In fact, I suspect any account of answered prayer will struggle with such a question, as long as one hopes to preserve the intuition, mentioned earlier, that cases in which the offering of petitionary prayers make no difference to God are not cases of answered prayer. So when Cohoe says that "The defender of petitionary prayer should be loath to give up multiple operative reasons", I want to add hastily that I did not defend this idea in my book.

Cohoe is not pleased with my treatment of epistemological issues, either. I claimed in my book that "the traditional theistic religious traditions do not promise knowledge concerning particular answered petitionary prayers" (Davison 2017, 90), but Cohoe says that I should "at least discuss what it would take

Please do not Cite. Citable Version has DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498
DRAFT

This is a Draft! Please do not Cite.
Always refer to the version Published in European Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 10, No. 2., pp. n–nn

to support such claims (e.g. how much of a track record is required? is being regarded as reliably discerning by one's community be enough?)" He mentions various accounts of tests, techniques, and practices of discernment for identifying God's voice in contemporary and traditional sources, and says that "dismissing all of these views without engagement does the reader a disservice". In fact, I would love to see a detailed epistemological defense on this front, based on contemporary or traditional sources. This is why, in my discussion of divine illumination, I stated my conclusion with explicit hesitation, and said that "this is one of those instances in which it seems to me that further philosophical work is warranted" (Davison 2017, 91, fn.24). But I didn't have the time, the resources, or the expertise to do such things in my book; one cannot do everything. I do hope, as I indicated in my discussion in the book, that others will pursue these questions in their own work.

Cohoe says that "Davison suggests that beliefs about answered prayer fail to meet Duncan Pritchard's criterion of safety". What I actually say is that "traditional theists may never be in a position to estimate with any confidence whether or not there exist possible worlds that would undermine a given person's knowledge of answered petitionary prayer" (Davison 2017, 76). (I fear that when Cohoe and other readers read the epistemological discussion in my book, they may be unduly influenced by the strongly skeptical conclusions I defended in an earlier article on this subject (Davison 2009), despite my expressed intention to temper that spirit in the book.) Cohoe also neglects to mention that my argument for this conclusion appeals to traditional theism itself and its widespread commitment to agnosticism concerning God's reasons for bringing about or permitting specific events in the world (Davison 2017, 74-6). (For the record, I think this is a novel argument that deserves further attention – some of the most serious epistemological challenges related to answered petitionary prayer come from within traditional theism itself.) Cohoe claims that "If I believe that my students like me because they laugh at my jokes, my belief does not amount to knowledge", because it fails Pritchard's safety constraint, but this is not at all clear to me – much more needs to be said about that case.

I do agree with Cohoe that "On theologies that distinguish between temporal and spiritual goods, petitioners may be in a much better epistemic situation when it comes to requests for spiritual goods". As I argue in my book, petitionary prayers for spiritual goods for one's own self are the easiest ones to defend. And of course Cohoe is right to say that the theological details can make all of the difference, and his comments along these lines are much more rich and nuanced and interesting than anything in my book.

But he also says that

> A defense of petitionary prayer should be evaluated on whether it successfully defends the sort of requests that are central to the theological practices of the religion in question (e.g. asking God for forgiveness), not on whether it can defend all sorts of requests to any sort of divine being (e.g. asking the Man Upstairs to help you win the lottery). To evaluate defenses or challenges, we need to know more about what the relevant theology takes to be valuable and why. (177)

Of course, it would be terrific to have a book that surveyed all of the reasonable theological accounts (contemporary and traditional) of spiritual goods and God's reasons for withholding or providing them, along with an exploration of the implications of those accounts for the philosophical issues raised in my book. Presently, I myself do not have the time, resources, or expertise to do this, though, and of course I did not do it in my little book. I do think Cohoe's description of defenses is rather restrictive, though – as philosophers, can't we identify some of the issues involved in every kind of petitionary prayer offered to the God of traditional theism and isolate those for specific attention? Following most of the literature in this area, that is what I did in my book, but of course that is just scratching the surface of the debate (as I mentioned in the introduction to my book).

Cohoe claims that I ignore the problem of value, especially with regard to possible objects of petitionary prayer. He says that I leave

> … specific discussion of the objects of prayer until chapter 8, meaning that this distinction is only employed after he has gone over most of the challenges and responses. There he divides prayer into self-directed and other-person directed petitionary prayer. Note that this misses the importance of prayers that are not for

Please do not Cite. Citable Version has DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498

DRAFT
ejpr
Published in: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion Vol 10, No 2 (2018)

This is a Draft! Please do not Cite.

Please do not Cite. Citable Version has DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498

> specific individuals but rather for communities (e.g. for the church, the nation, or the world as a whole) things that, in many theologies, are not reducible to collections of individuals. (177)

But this is not quite fair, since in chapter 1, I clearly distinguish the possible objects of petitionary prayer in the following way:

> It is not easy to draw a sharp distinction here, but I will use the phrase "self-directed" to refer to a petitionary prayer whose object primarily involves one's own self, "other-person-directed" to refer to a petitionary prayer whose object primarily involves another person or persons, and "non-person-directed" to refer to a petitionary prayer whose object is neither one's own self nor any other person (Davison 2017, 26).

In fact, after discussing general challenges and defenses based on considerations involving divine freedom (chapter 3) and epistemology (chapters 4 and 5), I employ the distinction Cohoe mentions immediately – the title of chapter 6 is "Divine Goodness and Praying for Others". I tried to organize the discussion of challenges and defenses from the literature around differences that emerged from the debate to date, because I thought that would help to orient the reader, but there are other ways of organizing the discussion that would be more useful for other purposes.

Cohoe says that instead of my way of distinguishing the possible objects of petitionary prayer,

> A more promising distinction is the traditional one between temporal goods, external things such as health and wealth that are valuable for carrying out certain activities but are separate from the person herself, and spiritual goods or goods of the soul, the intrinsic excellences (or lack thereof) of the human being herself. (178)

And here he may be quite right. I don't know. I drew my distinctions because they helped me to organize the literature in a way that I found helpful, but I'd love to see Cohoe or someone else approach the same questions with this distinction in mind instead. I certainly did not intend to assume anything about the relative importance of temporal versus spiritual goods, as my defense of petitionary prayer in chapters 8 and 10 makes clear. In that defense, following the work of Eleonore Stump, I claim that for the sake of friendship with God, God might require petitionary prayers from us before providing some really important things. (This novel defense, by the way, is limited in its application, but is designed not to require any Molinist assumptions about the extent of divine knowledge.)

My book focuses on individual petitioners rather than groups for the sake of simplicity and clarity, as Cohoe notes. He says that

> …on many theological views, this is the wrong approach. If prayer is primarily a communal activity, framing the inquiry around the difference made by token prayers given by particular individuals is the wrong way to proceed, just as asking whether this individual football player won or lost the game is the wrong line of inquiry. (181)

Of course, he is right that according to some theological views, petitionary prayer is primarily a communal activity. But that doesn't mean that these theological views imply that philosophically, our investigation should start with the communal case or make it the primary paradigm for analysis; that's a different question entirely.

He continues:

> The more holistic approach has not been sufficiently explored. Work needs to be done on applying the philosophy of collective action and responsibility to prayer, both metaphysically (what sort of unity would the church need to have to serve as the agent of prayer? What kind of common intention does there need to be between individuals for the prayers of various individual believers to causally function as a unified entity?) and epistemically (how could one know that one's prayers contribute to a whole that is causally efficacious, if one's prayers are just a small part of a greater whole?) Here the literature on petitionary prayer needs to be enriched by drawing on ecclesiology and collective action instead of pursuing the question atomistically. (182)

Here I agree completely with Cohoe. This is a rich area for future work. Had I undertaken such an approach in my book, it would have been a very different book, of course. But such an approach would surely shed new light on the questions, and I hope that people pursue it.

This is a Draft! Please do not Cite.

Always refer to the version Published in European Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 10, No. 2., pp. N–NN

By way of summary: if you want a basic explanation of the structure of individual petitionary prayer, an analysis of the difficulties involved in explaining what it means to say that such a prayer was answered by God, and a summary of challenges and defenses from the literature, including a discussion of some new ones, then you might find my book helpful. If you struggle with petitionary prayer, especially with skeptical challenges and what this means for faith, then you might find my book helpful. It will provide one way of orienting you in the debate and catch you up with most of the relevant literature. (For a more complete summary of my book from a neutral third party, see Wykstra 2017; you should also read Cohoe's paper, as I mentioned earlier, and there are many other good pieces in print and in production that have come to my attention since my book was written, so stay tuned.)

In fact, as I tell my friends, I can confidently assert that my book is the very best book-length discussion of petitionary prayer by an analytic philosopher in the entire English-speaking world – because it is the only one. But I sincerely hope that this does not remain true for long.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Davison, Scott A. 2009. "Petitionary Prayer". In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, edited by Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, 286–305. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

—. 2017. *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*. Oxford: Oxford Univ.Press.

Cohoe, Caleb M. 2014. "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer". *Faith and Philosophy* 31, no. 1: 24–45. doi:10.5840/faithphil201312302.

—. 2018. "How Could Prayer Make a Difference? Discussion of Scott A. Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*". *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 2: 171–185. doi:10.24204/ejpr.v10i2.2033

Rice, Rebekah L. H. 2016. "Reasons and Divine Action: A Dilemma". In *Free will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, edited by Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak, 258–76. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Wykstra, Stephen J. 2017, Review of *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation* by Scott A. Davison (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017). *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews.* https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/petitionary-prayer-a-philosophical-investigation/

DRAFT

Please do not Cite. Citable Version has DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V10I2.2498

Published in: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion Vol 10, No 2 (2018)