

CT 205

ORTHODOX  
THEORIES OF PRAYER.

BY

A BARRISTER.



PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,  
NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,  
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

*Price Threepence.*

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHYSICS DEPARTMENT  
5712 S. UNIVERSITY AVE.  
CHICAGO, ILL. 60637

## ORTHODOX THEORIES OF PRAYER.

---

SOME time ago, a controversy was raging in various periodicals on the subject of prayer—our reason for noticing which, at this late period, will directly appear.

The real issue raised was this—Is there any reason for supposing that human supplications are capable of influencing directly the processes of external nature? We say “external,” because no one seems to deny that a man may, by this agency, produce a great effect upon himself, and his own nature. To be sure, the *modus operandi* is a matter of dispute between the philosopher and the theologian, the former attributing whatever result may have followed solely to what is called reflex action, the latter to the immediate action of the Deity. Still, an effect is in both cases admitted, and it is not round this point that the controversy has raged. Again, we have used the word “directly,” because it is quite plain that human supplication may have a considerable indirect effect, say, upon a religious person at a critical period who knows that he is being prayed for, and who believes that a great force is being exerted on his behalf. So, too, curses (which are a species of prayer) have often brought about their own fulfilment, by the fears they have instilled into their objects. In these sorts of cases, candid theologians, even when adhering to their own views, are willing to admit that a solution, such as does not suppose any interference with natural laws, may fairly be submitted for consideration. If

men would go on praying for benefits on behalf of themselves, or of others in reach of their voices, or in reach of knowledge that those voices were being thus raised ; then, although there would be a difference of opinion as to the mode in which the results of such action, admitting that it had results, must be held to have been brought about, still the man of science would have very little to say. But the contention of theologians goes a great deal farther than this, and it appears to us that the men of science have been justified, nay, that they have only discharged an imperative duty, in entering a most earnest protest against it. The contention is, as we have said, that human prayer is capable of modifying directly the course of external nature. No better illustration of this claim can be given than the familiar case of rain and fine weather. The churches maintain that the faithful are able to procure at one time a downfall, and at another a cessation of rain ; and they have imposed it as a duty upon their members, when called upon by the officiating minister, or other higher authority, to put in force the machinery for this end. Upon this well-worn subject, we repeat that we have hitherto refrained from offering any observations to the readers of this series, in which, indeed, two or three excellent papers on Prayer in general have already appeared.

We have been induced to break our silence in consequence of an article which has recently appeared in an able contemporary (*Fraser's Magazine*, Sept. 1873). This article puts forward a theory of prayer, which is not new,\* but which is very clearly stated and agreeably illustrated by the writer. For aught we know, it may have been still better set forth elsewhere—for we do not profess to have read everything which has been written on this subject of late. We, at any rate, have not met with any clearer recent statement of it, nor do

\* For instance, it is to be found in Euler's *Lettres à une princesse Allemande*.

we remember to have seen it anywhere distinctly exposed. Probably men of the calibre of Professor Tyndall have thought that it would be a waste of time to show its inherent weakness. Yet it is never a waste of time to refute theories of this kind, which, from their plausibility are particularly liable to attract superficial minds, and which, under the guise of offering scientific solutions are really the offspring, of a spirit which is fundamentally opposed to true science.

The theory is this, that prayer may be able to operate directly upon the sequence of external events, without any violation of law. The Almighty may have so adjusted the course of nature as to make the favourable issue of a prayer an effect dependent upon the prayer as a cause; the particular cause having been foreseen and having its effect assigned to it in the general scheme. Thus, for example, a high reading of the barometer at Bergen, and a low reading at Dundee will indicate the approach of a storm, for the inhabitants of the East Coast of Scotland; yet, a pious mother, with a son in the North Sea, may succeed in averting it by her entreaties to Heaven, without any violation of law, or consequent disturbance. For the law may be that the wind blows from a high to a low barometer, with a force proportioned to the differences of the barometric pressures *in all cases where prayer to the contrary is not put up, or, rather, put up successfully.* In cases where it has been decided that the prayer shall be granted, as suppose in the foregoing instance, there may have been "an adjustment from eternity of physical causes to this specific moral end," the result "being serenely wrought out by the natural operation of remote causes, the combination of which no science could have predicted beforehand, albeit after the fact no science can detect any trace of violence or interference with the steadfast order of things. The event which answered to the prayer had lain latent from of old in the undeveloped plan of nature, just as

surely as it had lain from the beginning in the secrets of the Divine foreknowledge."

We have here, by the way, an illustration of the strange mode in which theologians are endeavouring to engraft on their system the modern conception of "Uniformity of Law." A little while ago, comparatively speaking, it would have been considered by their predecessors in the highest degree blasphemous to suggest that the Almighty either would not, or could not comply directly with the requests of his supplicants, in the same manner as men are able to oblige others; and that inconceivably complex and intricate chains of arrangements stretching up into infinite time must necessarily have been made in every case where prayer had to be answered. Science, however, having forced this conception of Law upon them, they are in the position of men in the fairy tale who have got hold of a Genius without being possessed of the means of making him obey them. They really suppose that they have enlisted science on their side, or at any rate have disarmed all reasonable opposition from that quarter, when in view of a series of phenomena the precise causes of which have not been ascertained, they exhibit another series of entirely dissimilar phenomena, and without proving the faintest connection between the two, call upon us to recognise in the latter a "possible cause" of the former. It is the old story of the Goodwin Sands and Tenterden steeple. And supposing the phenomenon in that case had been, as it is easy to conceive that it might have been, the disappearance of a shelf that had stopped up Sandwich haven, instead of the appearance of a new one, it might have been argued on these lines, that the building of Tenterden steeple, an act presumably agreeable to the Almighty, was a "possible cause" of the harbour being opened. We might then have been able with Mr Bacon, the author of the article we are considering, to detect "in the day when the earth and sea shall yield up their secrets, running

parallel with a line of moral influences, the vestiges of an old train of geologic causes, working down through all the periods of creation until the two lines of diverse operation converge upon a distinct predeterminate point of time and space," the points upon which these parallel lines have all along been converging having been on this hypothesis the building of the steeple, on the one hand, and the clearing away of the sand on the other. "Tous les événements sont enchainés dans le meilleur des mondes !" in a way which even Pangloss did not suspect. On reading the above, we are irresistibly reminded of Sheridan's simile. Whatever science there may be in all this, has been disfigured, as gipsies are supposed to disfigure stolen children, to prevent its being recognised.

Of course, where real causes are unknown, anything whatever, the agency of which in producing the given phenomenon has not been actually disproved, may be labelled as a possible agent or cause. We can prove that the presence of the Sun above the horizon is not the cause of dew, because we have dew by night after the setting of the sun. But we cannot disprove the hypothesis of some of the low church papers, that Ritualism and Infidelity attract cholera to our shores. Nor can we disprove the hypothesis, that prayer is able to influence storms. But we can submit some considerations which render these and similar hypotheses so violently improbable, that they may be safely neglected. Indeed, if any account had to be taken of them, there could be no science in the proper sense of the term.

Whenever we are able to trace natural phenomena up to their real causes, it is found that human prayer is not among these causes. This is a conclusion co-extensive with human experience, and must be accepted as a truth of universal application. No person, for instance, supposes that eclipses are now-a-days in any way affected by prayer. The opposite is demonstrable. For an eclipse, say of the Sun, being immediately due to the

interposition of the moon between us and that luminary, a calculation is made of the time when this collocation of the three bodies will be known to take place, and it is found not to be subject to any disturbance such as would be produced by the introduction of a new cause not previously accounted for. What is true of an eclipse holds good of the most ordinary physical phenomena of every-day life, with the causes of which we have become acquainted. The presumption is enormous, that in all those cases in which the imperfection of our instruments leaves us unable to trace phenomena to their true causes, there is similarly no room left for the agency of prayer. This conclusion is immensely strengthened by the fact, that even where we are unable to penetrate to the ultimate laws of phenomena, yet, whenever we are able to make any way at all in a discovery of their nature, we find ourselves in a region of absolute law, *i.e.*, in the presence of secondary laws, which may be plainly conjectured to be dependent upon more general laws. At any rate, the *onus probandi* is thrown upon those who assert the contrary, and it is difficult to see how they can shape their objections so as not to fall under one of the three following heads.

1. It may be said that, even granting all this, no absolute case is made out against the efficacy of prayer of this particular kind. For it cannot be demonstrated that the future order of nature will resemble the past order. This has been admitted by Hume; and we think that Theology in its struggles is capable of snatching at the admission as at a straw. Indeed, Canon Mozley has turned it to considerable account in his Bampton Lectures. According to this view, even although eclipses should be shown to have been due to certain well-defined causes in the past, yet it by no means *necessarily* follows that they will not be influenced by prayer in the future; and it would be therefore by no means an absurdity to pray against the occurrence of



one, supposing such a course should at any time seem desirable in the interests of the supplicant or others. This theory would, of course, render an entreaty for any miracle (as we term it), however stupendous, perfectly legitimate. This point, however, the value of which may be left to the consideration of the reader, is not taken by Mr Bacon. The argument here is that prayer may be conceived as having such and such an effect in an altered constitution of nature, to which our past experience could furnish no guide. Whereas, his contention is, that there is reason to suppose it may have an effect in the present constitution of things. And indeed, unless this latter ground be established, it is clear that although many ingenious metaphysical invitations might be addressed to them, yet, as a matter of practice, no persons would offer up these prayers.

2. Prayer may be asserted to be one of the possible causes of physical phenomena, till the other causes are discovered. The law may be so arranged that when these other causes are found out by man, prayer ceases to act as an agency, in consequence, it may be said, of its ceasing to be put up, though this, by the way, is not strictly the case, for long after the truth as to any phenomenon is laid bare by science, the uninstructed will continue to pray in the direction of their supposed interests. According to this view, although a thousand years hence meteorology may be so far advanced as that rain and fine weather will be predicted with certainty a long while beforehand, and prayer will accordingly *then* be futile, it may not be futile now. Or, to take eclipses again, some thousands of years ago prayer *may* have been effectual in warding them off, though it would be idle to offer it up now-a-days. This is something in the shape of the former theory reversed. It is a projection of chaos into the past instead of the future. The Egyptians may have been right when they informed Herodotus that the sun had twice risen in the west and twice set in the east. And this singular re

sult will follow, that any one who gets hold of what afterwards turns out to be a natural law, for the first time, and keeps it to himself, will be wrong, as omitting one important ingredient, viz., prayer, which would still be presumably capable of being followed by an effect not allowed for. But what is here supposed as to a person keeping a discovery to himself for a while is, as has already been stated, exactly what takes place, if for one person we substitute a small body of scientific men. These discoveries do not penetrate to the mass of citizens in civilised communities for many years; and here is an excellent opportunity for observing whether the calculations of philosophers are liable to be disturbed by such an agency as prayer. Yet no single instance of any such disturbance has been verified.

3. The above theories may excite a smile in the minds of those who are unfamiliar with the methods of theology. But is there anything one whit less absurd in the remaining theory to which we shall be driven, and which is supported by most of the leading thinkers on the orthodox side,—which is indeed the one upon which the case of Prayer (in the sense in which we are using the word) is mainly rested? It is thus clearly stated by Mr Mill:—"Originally all natural events were ascribed to such (special) interpositions. At present, every educated person rejects this explanation in regard to all classes of phenomena of which the laws have been fully ascertained, though some have not yet reached the point of referring all phenomena to the idea of law, but believe that rain and sunshine, famine and pestilence, victory and defeat, death and life, are issues which the Creator does not leave to the operation of his general laws, but reserves to be decided by express acts of volition."\* In judging this latter theory it will be found that as is constantly the case in matters not admitting absolute determination, we are reduced to a balancing of probabilities. We must re-

\* "System of Logic," fifth ed., vol. ii., p. 521, note.

peat that the matter stands thus. Prayer having once been held capable of producing an effect upon all physical phenomena, and being now by general consent restricted to those only the laws of which have not been discovered and established, and this process of adding phenomena to the domain of law, and consequently subtracting them from the domain of prayer, having gone on uninterruptedly, and *pari passu* with accurate observation, is it more probable that phenomena the causes of which are unknown resemble those which have been explained, in being governed by similar laws, or that they are exceptions, in which our prayers, demonstrably useless in all other like cases (if the present constitution of the universe is to be maintained), may be, after all, efficient causes? Or, in other words, no single instance being scientifically established in which prayer has had any effect on external nature, and the course of nature, as far as it has been ascertained in countless cases and for countless ages, absolutely excluding this agency, is there any ground for claiming it as a power in those cases where we are at present unable to trace effects to their true causes?

Theologians reply that there is such a ground; and we do not know that in our day they have found a more able spokesman than the late Dean Mansel, whom we shall accordingly quote. In his "Limits of Religious Thought" he writes as follows:—

"Even within the domain of Physical Science, however much analogy may lead us to conjecture the universal prevalence of law and orderly sequence, it has been acutely remarked that the phenomena which are most immediately important to the life and welfare of man are precisely those which he never has been, and probably never will be, able to reduce to a scientific calculation." \*

This, by the way, is a very slovenly classification, for if there be any phenomena "immediately important to

\* P. 134, fifth edition.

the life and welfare of man," such are, certainly, before all others, the regular transmission of light and heat from the sun, the alternation of day and night and the seasons, in compliance with laws which prevent our being sent wandering through space or absorbed in the central luminary, and other phenomena of the kind which *are* capable of being reduced to a scientific calculation. However, Dean Mansel continues:—

"This argument admits of a further development, in which it may be applied to meet some of the recent objections urged, on supposed scientific grounds, against the efficacy of prayer, as employed in times of national calamity, such as pestilence or famine. The celestial phenomena, recurring at regular intervals and calculable to a second, are by no means a type of the manner in which the whole course of nature is subject to law. On the contrary, there are other classes of natural phenomena, with respect to which matter is to some extent directly subject to the influence of mind; man being capable, by his own free action, not indeed of changing or suspending the laws of nature, but of producing, in accordance with those laws, a different succession of phenomena from that which would have taken place without his interposition. Franklin sends up his electric kite, and directs the fluid with which the thundercloud is charged to a course different from that which it would otherwise have taken, and the same thing is now done by every man who erects a lightning-conductor. Subject to these influences, the material world must be regarded, not as a rigid system of pre-ordained antecedents and consequents, but as an elastic system, which is undoubtedly capable of being influenced by the will of man, and which may, therefore, without any violation of scientific principle, be supposed to be also under the influence of the will of God."\*

\* P. 135, note. How about earthquakes (against which men are taught to pray), and in which of the two classes of phenomena shall we rank them, and the cognate phenomena of volcanic eruptions?

The argument is, that where phenomena are capable of being directly influenced by man, and so removed from the sphere of exact prediction, they may be supposed to be capable of being directly influenced by God, and so made the subject of prayer. The reverend Dean has put the point rather strangely, but we will not dwell on this. Every one, that is, every Theist, admits the above proposition and something more. We believe that *all* phenomena are capable of being directly influenced by the Almighty. But this is not a fair statement of the point in issue. The argument, to have any bearing on the subject, should be capable of being maintained in this form. "Where phenomena are capable of being directly influenced by man, there is reason to suppose that they will be directly influenced by God at the request of man." The real question is not as to the power of God, but as to his mode of working as revealed to us. That the Deity could, if he thought fit, in answer to human prayer, arrest the course of a thunder-storm or a pestilence, may be conceded, without any appreciable weight being thereby accorded to the argument for prayer. What we have to consider is, whether there is any reliable evidence of his ever having worked in this fashion. If there is not, then to talk about prayer as a "cause" is an idle speculation. On the other hand, human labour or effort is a *vera causa* capable of producing determinate results on external nature, as every day experience shows us. Not only does Franklin divert the course of the electric fluid, but men have changed the climate of large tracts of the earth by cultivation, thus entirely altering what, but for their intervention, would have been the course of rain, storms, &c. Zoophytes have produced an analogous effect by raising coral islands. To argue that because man is able to act immediately on nature in certain cases, therefore God in those particular cases may be supposed to act in a like way, is a complete *non-sequitur*. Again, to argue from the power

of human effort over nature, the power of human prayer to accomplish like results in the same field, is equally absurd. In the one case, as, for instance, in the clearing away of large forests, and the consequent diminution of rainfall in those districts, we have a regular chain of causation, entitling us to rank the human effort as an antecedent and the increased dryness as a consequent. Here a fresh antecedent being introduced is followed by a change in the phenomena, and in this sense of course all nature is an "elastic system," the stars of heaven as well as drops of rain. When prayer has been exhibited to us as an unmistakable antecedent, followed in like manner by clearly ascertained consequents, we shall think it as much a matter of duty to pray as to labour; but not till then.

Strange to say, theologians have never made an attempt in this direction. More than this, they have looked upon all efforts to ascertain the value of prayer, even when undertaken with the most single-minded desire of arriving at the truth, as so many attempts nearly resembling blasphemies. Surely this is a mistake on the part of the upholders of this supposed agency. For, if it be capable of influencing phenomena, in the way suggested, this influence *may* possibly in some one case (and one would suffice) be capable of being traced; and this possibility would be a sufficient justification of research, even in the eyes of the theologian, inasmuch as if it were realised, the sceptic would be silenced. Meanwhile, we are compelled to say with the lawyers, "De non apparentibus et non existentibus eadem est lex."

To return to the theory of which Mr Bacon, the author of the article in *Fraser*, is the latest spokesman. It possesses what to many will be the incontestable advantage of extending the power of prayer by making it applicable to *past* as well as *future* events. He informs us at the outset that he was travelling twenty years ago in Mesopotamia with two American theo-

gians, one of them a missionary. A letter reached the latter, dated long months before at Shanghai in China, informing him that his brother was dangerously ill of a typhus fever that was approaching its crisis. The question arose, would it be right to pray for the sick man? To which the theologians replied, no. He is either recovered or dead. In the first case, prayer is superfluous; in the second, it is useless. Mr Bacon was not satisfied with this answer at the time, and after much consideration he deems it wrong. "The reasons against excluding such a case from the domain of prayer are like those which apply against excluding all cases which come within the sphere of physical law." "The difficulty involved in it is not substantially different from that involved in prayer for future physical blessings; it is only more vivid, and more incapable of being evaded. It does not need a great philosopher, it is possible for a childlike mind, to recognise that an unknown fixed event in the past, as well as in the future, may have been fixed with reference to its relations, not only in the physical but also in the moral system; so that it is no absurdity to believe that a certain chain of invisible and imponderable morbid influences, terminating in an unknown issue of life and death on the banks of the Yang-tse-Kiang might have been adjusted with fatherly reference to what, six or twelve months later, was to be the spiritual attitude and act of a heavy-hearted missionary wanderer floating on a goatskin raft down the Tigris."

The common-sense of the reader will, it is needless to say, be perfectly satisfied with the reply of "the theologians." There is, indeed, a very great difference between praying for future and praying for past "physical blessings." In the one case it is possible that the prayer may have an effect: in the other case, to suppose this is in reality a contradiction in terms. A thing cannot have for a consequent that which has preceded it. It must be remarked, however, that, according to

this theory, the *possible* antecedent *e.g.*, in the case of the missionary's brother recovering or dying, is not, strictly speaking, the missionary's act (praying or declining to pray), but *God's foreknowledge of what the act would be*. Not that this really mends the matter. But, before looking into this question a little more closely, let us see whither we shall be led if we adopt the line of action which Mr Bacon prescribes.

*Any past event whatever*, the issue of which is unknown to the person praying, may be made the subject of prayer, and (provided there be nothing improper or immoral in the request) of legitimate prayer. To entreat that Judas Iscariot, or even Cain, may have repented before dying, that the number of slaughtered in some ancient battle was not so great as reported by ancient historians, that Seneca may have made acquaintance with Paul and become a convert to Christianity, all these are fair objects of supplication. The event may have been adjusted in reference to the subsequent spiritual attitude and act. *Prayer for the dead becomes a solemn duty for all of us*, as we are reminded by the illustrations just given. For their permanent condition may have been adjusted (we cannot help using Mr Bacon's own tenses) in the same way. If the missionary on the Tigris was authorised to pray that his brother at Shanghai had recovered six months before, he was just as much, nay, very much more, called upon to pray that, in the event of that brother not having recovered, he might have departed this life in the odour of sanctity. Similarly we may pray this on behalf of any person whatever whom we know to be dead, and whose final earthly state of mind we do not know. And this being so, surely all those who believe in the efficacy of retrospective prayer, ought to set to work and pray for all the dead. We may add that a very rude shock is given by this theory to the doctrine of free-will, as might easily be shown. This, however, we shall not press, though we apprehend that it would have weight



with a writer holding the theological views of Mr Bacon.

According to this theory, prayer, impertinent and indeed impious to one man, would be a solemn duty to a person standing by him—we mean in reference to an event one and the same, and possessing an equal interest for both.

Let us suppose that, instead of being on the Tigris, the missionary had been at a hotel in New York, and that a gentleman had called upon him with the announcement that he had recently come from Shanghai. "Here is a letter," he says, "which I had intended to post to you on my arrival here, but have preferred bringing with me, on accidentally learning your address. It informs you of a serious illness of your brother's, six months ago, and of the issue. Open the letter and you will see whether he recovered or died." It would seem that it would be the missionary's duty, before breaking open the seal, to kneel down and pray that his brother had recovered, inasmuch as to *him* the result is unknown. Indeed, Mr Bacon puts a precisely similar case in reference to a "telegraphic despatch." Would it not be the duty of the visitor to reply, "My good sir, if *you* don't know, *I* do. Nothing that you can devise can alter the event you will find recorded in that letter." "O! but the Almighty may have so adjusted a chain of morbid influences, &c., with fatherly reference to what is now going to be my spiritual act." "But the very words you have used, 'may *have* adjusted,' show you what nonsense you are talking." The pious missionary, however, adheres to his view, offers his prayer, opens the letter, and reads the result. Hereupon his equally pious and very delicate sister chances to come into the room, and is informed of the illness, but the result is withheld from her. *How is the missionary to advise his sister?* Clearly that she ought to pray.\* Prayer, which is a

\* We might go further. It would be the *duty* of the missionary

futility for *him* still remains a duty to her, or else all this theory tumbles to pieces. But he cannot advise her to pray with any reference to the result, for the result is known to him. He is in the position the visitor stood in a short time before. He can only advise her to pray in a sense quite different from that in which prayer is used in this theory, viz., as a possible means of influencing past events. Now transport the missionary back to the Tigris, and suppose the visitor (Smith) at Shanghai. Smith (and a number of other people) know the event: the only difference is that he does not happen to be at hand to tell the missionary that he knows it. But this does not make the prayer less futile.

As this is a theory extremely likely to lay hold of certain persons of a theological turn, we do not think it a waste of time to repeat that prayer of this kind is an attempt to tamper with a past event by getting at a past antecedent which (admitting the theory) has already produced a consequent. It is plain that a person, C., who knows what happened six months ago,—say that A. then recovered of a dangerous illness,—and who is a believer in Mr Bacon's general theory, would reason correctly thus as to B., A.'s surviving brother: "God may have so adjusted the result in this particular instance in accordance with his foreknowledge that B. would either pray or not pray. If B. prays I shall think that this was very likely the case. If he does not pray, then clearly it was not the case. But either way prayer can be of no avail now." One of the numerous fallacies of this theory lies in supposing that this view which is true to C. need not be true to B.; that because a thing is not known to B. it may be presumed to be in a certain sense undetermined, by B. If it is true to C. it must be true generally. It follows that when any event is known to *any* being in creation not to inform his sister of the result, with the view of inducing her to pray.

prayer about it becomes useless to *everybody*. Another fallacy consists in not observing that in either case, *i.e.*, whether the issue of the disease be or be not known to the supplicant, a known past event has to be dealt with, *viz.*, the Deity's complete foreknowledge of what would be the supplicant's course. The prayer is offered up in order that the Deity foreseeing it—*which now he is enabled to have done*—may have been thereby disposed to save the sick man. But if a cannon may have been fired off, or not fired off, at Waterloo, according as a foreknowledge of whether I should this day pull or not pull a string influenced a superior power, I can no more by my action on the string affect that foreknowledge than I can fire off the cannon of 1815.

This theory, then, *viz.*, that of the Supreme Being adjusting the issue of sickness, &c., to subsequent entreaties, is not only a wild figment of the brain, opposed to the lessons derived from a study of nature, but it does not even justify the practice which is sought to be founded upon it.\*

\* Theologians, like common jurymen, require to have things often put before them; so I shall make no apology for again setting the matter out thus. Granting Mr Bacon's wild theory of the existence of a law in virtue of which persons' lives or deaths may, in certain cases (for there is no pretence that this is *always* so), depend on subsequent prayers, we will suppose that a certain event, the issue of which is to me unknown, has reached me, *e. gr.*, the illness of my brother six months ago. Now I believe that the Deity *may* have ordered that issue in reference to his foreknowledge of what would be my action. The only effect of my prayer now can be to inform me whether the issue, when ascertained, can be brought into possible connection with the law.

I pray—news comes of his recovery—law has possibly come into operation.

I pray—news comes of his death—the case did not come under the law.

I don't pray—news comes of his death—law has possibly come into operation.

I don't pray—news comes of his recovery—the case did not come under the law.

In the two cases where my prayer does not correspond with the past event, law could not have operated.

In the two cases where my prayer did correspond with the past event, law *might* have operated.

What, we may ask in conclusion, is gained to the cause of theology by these wild assertions of the power of prayer over external nature? To what purpose all these astounding complications? The belief, it may be said, is necessary to stimulate a prayerful spirit. Yes, but then it ought to be shown that this is a prayerful spirit exercised in the right direction. No one, it is clear, from the theological point of view, can know for certain whether supplications of this kind meet with success or not. We should have thought that the spirit which it is deemed so desirable to cultivate might find a sufficient scope in the internal sphere, where, though the *modus operandi* may be in dispute, no one denies that prayer is capable of producing effects, which is the chief thing. With regard to external nature, may not a spirit of submission to supreme wisdom—rather than one of a desire for change in our own interests—be, at least as “theological” as it is philosophical? Are not, we say, true philosophy and true religion at one, the former in urging that it is wiser, the latter in admitting that it is more devout, to leave external nature in the hands of the Author of Nature?

The fallacy consists in putting it that, *if* I pray God may have saved my brother; or, *if* I don't pray, God may not have saved my brother.

The fact is, that my brother has been saved or not saved with full foreknowledge of what I should do.

If saved, saved either *because* it was known I would pray; or, *though* it was known I would not.

If dead, dead either *because* it was known I would not pray; or, *in spite* of its being known that I would pray.

