



December 2007

## Three Paradoxes of Prayer

Daniel H. Weiss  
*University of Cambridge*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Weiss, Daniel H.. "Three Paradoxes of Prayer." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 5, no. 1 (2007): 149-155.  
<https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-n799-ex23>.

This Afterward is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

# THREE PARADOXES OF PRAYER

---

DANIEL WEISS

*University of Virginia*

My lead essay for this issue originated in an independent-study graduate course, and it is gratifying to see it enter the ongoing conversation of *Textual Reasoning*. I am grateful to and honored by all those who have contributed to this volume; their essays have both complicated and illuminated the profundity of the act of prayerful address. Reflecting on all of the pieces together, I am struck by the recurrence of three principal paradoxes: the identity of the addressee, the question of speech versus silence, and the role of names and predicates. Here, I offer concluding and summarizing reflections on the participants' varying perspectives on these central themes.

## **The Paradox of the Addressee**

Whom does one address in prayer? The analyses presented in this issue give different answers to this question; their very diversity points to the fact that the address of prayer tends to break down the normal conceptual distinctions among first-person, second-person, and third-person utterances. For instance, Newton asks, "Can 'You' be said by 1<sup>st</sup> persons to the Jewish God without necessarily referring both Him and them to the 3<sup>rd</sup> person neighbors who are each other's ever-present company?" Typically, a second-person address excludes the third-person,

and vice-versa, but the 'odd' address of prayer must somehow contain both together. Likewise, Kepnes' reading of Cohen shows us that the first person is also an object of prayer, as liturgical engagement calls forth one's ethical self. In a sense, we can say that the address to 'you' is simultaneously an address to the 'I' that the pray-er strives to become. All three grammatical 'persons' are therefore simultaneously addressed or referred in a single utterance. They cannot be separated, and to neglect or abandon any one of them is also to neglect and abandon the others.

As a result, any attempt to determine the relative priority of these persons gives rise to further strange results. For instance, both Newton and Kepnes emphasize the ways in which the presence of third persons precedes and enables the second-person address of prayer. Noting the first-person plural formulation ("we") of Jewish prayer, Newton argues that a proper saying of 'you' can only take place within a prayer community. Similarly, Kepnes proposes that the ethical self (who addresses the second person in prayer) can only arise out of and be preserved within a communal cultural-linguistic system. For both, one must be in the position of saying 'you' to human others before one can say 'you' to the divine other. In contrast, my essay argued that the saying of 'you' in prayer can enable the saying of 'you' in community. That is, the ethicizing practice of addressing the mere-'you' can help one to treat human others as persons, transforming them from 'its' into 'yous'. Which, then, truly has priority? Does one move from the divine other to the human others, or from the humans others to the divine other? Perhaps, in a further oddness of prayer's 'you,' the two may be mutually dependent, so that one cannot assign ultimate priority to one over the other.

Katz's essay provides a practical corollary to these theoretical questions of interdependence. She compares the utterances directed towards a divine other with utterances directed towards a civic-collective other, showing the ways in which prayer or declaration of faith can have unintended negative consequences. The Pledge of Allegiance, while directed towards abstract notions of "the flag the United States of America" and "the republic for which it stands," also strives to heighten concern for one's fellow-citizens by demanding "liberty and justice for

all." Yet, she argues, this same Pledge can also produce distortions, by creating unthinking attitudes among those who utter it (thus dehumanizing the first person through ethical abdication) and by excluding 'others' through the polarizing inclusion of "under God" (thus undermining relations among the third persons of the civic community). These same dangers also apply to prayer: while the paradoxical interdependence of person means that address to the second person can also ethicize one's relations to self and to human others, a distorted form of prayer can corrode those same relations. Katz highlights the need for practices that could help prevent these distortions, extending the Jewish notion of *kavanah* to the American civic realm and reminding us that the words of the Pledge are not sufficient in themselves. Unlike objective forms of deictic address, in which a proper external situation is all that is needed (for example, "You have red hair" is a valid utterance, as long as one is standing before a red-haired person), the fixed words of the Pledge, like those of prayer, require a certain ethical inward comportment for their validity. In this sense, she demonstrates the ways in which the paradoxical indeterminacy of prayer's address calls for special responsibilities and concentration on the part of the pray-ers.

### **The Paradox of Speaking**

Who is the speaker in the act of prayer? Before a transcendent addressee, is a mere human being even capable of speaking at all? Magid's commentary on the GRA's remarks asserts that speech and silence (as commonly understood) are both inadequate; rather, prayer requires the oxymorons of "silent speech" and "spoken silence." As expounded by the GRA via Magid, the utterance of the prelude to the Amidah ("Adonai, open my lips") "conjoins the *Shekhina* with the worshipper." In this theatrical portrayal, the worshipper can speak only by speaking as someone else; in a sense, the worshipper cannot speak until it is not the worshipper, but rather the *Shekhina*, who speaks. Yet, viewed differently, it is the worshipper whose mouth is opened and who utters the prayer. As such, the identity of the speaker cannot be determinately identified.

Likewise, what is known as the silent Amidah “actually constitutes the spoken word of the worshipper,” while in the spoken repetition of the Amidah, the worshipper is silenced as the cantor (as representative of the congregation) speaks. In these examples, speaking and non-speaking must somehow occur simultaneously, even though this is logically ‘impossible’; what is normally an either-or here becomes a necessary both-and.

The complementary insights of Dickey and Newton corroborate the ways in which an analysis of prayer produces antinomies with regard to the act of speaking. Drawing on previous Jewish commentators, Newton suggests that “in some sense, God’s infinitude and transcendence moots the prayer’s presumptuousness and perhaps better merits silence.” In this sense, while we finite humans can speak about empirical matters of the everyday world, the notion of speaking about, much less to, an infinite God seems a super-human task of which few would be capable. Conversely, Dickey argues that the very non-finitude of the mere-‘you’ is precisely what makes *all* human beings capable of speaking in prayer: The addressee of prayer “is so inherently salient (so ‘present,’ in any context) that further contextual specification is unnecessary. God is present, automatically, in any context, for anyone uttering a prayer.” In this sense, prayer would be the *least* presumptuous form of speech. My sense is that Dickey and Newton are both right, and that the nature of prayer’s address is best explicated by preserving both positions together, despite their ‘incompatibility.’

### **The Paradox of Names and Predicates**

Does the use of specific divine names and predicates add to or detract from the act of prayer? Are such specifications necessary or extraneous? In Plevan’s presentation of Buber, the use of a particular name for God is no mere linguistic marker, but contains a specific and significant meaning: “[T]he divine name reveals the divine character, and knowing the meaning of the divine name makes a divine-human encounter possible.” The rabbinic practice of not pronouncing the God’s name would thus undermine that encounter, so that “the standard translation of the phrase,

*adonai eloheinu*, 'Lord our God,' seems to say nothing at all. It is not at all clear who is being addressed." In contrast, my essay argued for the benefits of the rabbinic not-naming and emphasized the idolatrous dangers inherent in naming. Once again, as in the case of speech vs. silence, it may be the case that there is no single good solution to this dilemma. Buber is right, and the rabbis are also right; pronouncing a name is problematic, and not pronouncing a name is problematic. If this paradox is real, it might teach us there is no 'safe' way of addressing God; rather, prayer requires a constant attentiveness to contradictory perspectives that can never be reconciled.

One can take a similar approach to the question of specifying predicates. Criticizing the idea of a mere-'you', Rashkover claims that such predicates are essential, because "a 'wholly other' deity is so removed from anything human that it becomes impossible to speak of this deity in any meaningful way, including the reference to it as the 'you' whom we address in prayer." While Rashkover argues that a wholly other deity would preclude address, my essay maintains that the addressee *must* be wholly other in order to be addressed as 'you.' These positions appear to be incompatible: is the 'wholly otherness' of the addressee demanded, or is it excluded? Rashkover's argument makes sense, in that the closer, more similar, and more familiar something is, the more naturally we are able to relate to it. In contrast, the more different something is, the less we are able to relate to it. Pushing this to the extreme, if something is radically different and wholly other, we would not be able to relate to it at all. However, from another perspective, one can argue that saying 'you' requires that the addressee remain different and unfamiliar. To be sure, a person's physical features (e.g. the person's eye color, hair length, or the sound of his or voice) might be similar to my own, or at least familiar to me. However, even when I know someone well, the part of them that I address by 'you' remains completely ungraspable and non-comprehensible. Without that irremediable otherness, the addressee would be an 'it' and not a 'you'. Thus, it is not only the divine addressee that must be 'wholly other,' but also every human addressee in Jacques Derrida's formulation, "*Tout autre est tout autre*," "Every other is

absolutely other.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Dickey’s essay points out that the complete lack of specification for prayer’s divine addressee can actually *add to* the closeness and presentness of the relation. In this sense, one could say that the addressee of prayer is radically present *precisely by being* radically transcendent.

Again, if both perspectives are cogent, then predicates would be both necessary and unnecessary. As such, a practical implementation of this paradox could pronounce the predicates and recognize them as necessary, while also recognizing that they are not objectively or universally valid; rather, they gain validity through the worshipper’s act of uttering them with *kavanah* and intention. Rashkover’s criticism of my essay is thus dialectically warranted and can serve as an important corrective: if an account of prayer comes across as under-emphasizing the predicates, then they ought to be emphasized more. Conversely, if such an account comes across as under-emphasizing the full sufficiency of the ‘you’-alone, then *that* ought to be emphasized more. However, in accord with the paradoxical logic of the ‘you’ of prayer, neither ought to be emphasized to the exclusion or negation of the other.

## Conclusion

While some would be inclined to treat these paradoxes as merely apparent and would accordingly seek to resolve their contradictions, I have deliberately presented them here as unresolved and unresolvable. That is to say, while conceptual contradictions may sometimes be the result of unclear thinking, they may, in other cases, be a proper and expected consequence of a fundamentally vague subject matter. With regard to the topic at hand, it may be that the second-person *address* of prayer may produce conceptual multiplicity when viewed through the lens of third-person *theorization and analysis*. Put differently, the subject matter of the prayer’s address may “overflow” the bounds of any single consistent conceptualization. Peter Ochs’ piece points to this possibility by

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.82.

arguing that my essay lends itself to multiple “contradictory” readings; because of the “epistemic vagueness” of the thesis, he suggests, any given reading must be placed dialogically alongside its “opposite.” This openness to different readings was, in fact, one of my intentions when I wrote the essay; however, this feature also means that my essay was insufficient and incomplete in itself. Without the conversation and dialogue of other participants’ divergent perspectives, the internal conceptual contradictions of the ‘you’ of prayer could not be explicitly depicted. Thus, rather feeling the need to resolve the multiplicity of the different essays in this issue, we can view their very non-consistency as necessary for a fuller account of prayer’s address, in all its paradoxicality and oddness.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Peter Ochs and Emily Filler for advice and editorial suggestions throughout the coming-to-be of this issue.