What does prayer teach us about God?

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Abstract
Using Augustine as a dialogue partner, I consider what prayer teaches us about God and ourselves in relation to God. I argue, primarily, that prayer illuminates the great distinction between creatures and God, enabling us to live into it. Second, I reflect on the elucidating power of prayer with respect to our participation in God. In so doing, I show the ‘shaping effect’ of metaphysical reflection on the prayers of the faithful.

Keywords
Augustine, creator, creature, distinction, metaphysics, prayer, relation

In this article I explore, primarily, how prayer illuminates the distinction between God and creatures and, second, the participation of creatures in God’s nature. In so doing, I show something of what Rowan Greer calls ‘the shaping effect of theology’, specifically the impact that Christian teaching on God has on the prayers of the faithful.¹

When we pray, we pray to a God who is without cause. We open ourselves up to the sublime truth that God is uncreated. We also begin to learn a basic truth about ourselves into which we must live: namely, that we are created by a God who does not need us.² As we pray, we confirm the foundational truth that we are not our own good – God is; the good that we are as creatures made in God’s image is a participation in God ‘according to likeness’.³

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¹ Rowan Greer, The Shaping Effect of Theology (London: Routledge, 2001).
² John Finnis, Natural Law and Natural Order (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 314.
³ St John of the Cross, A Treatise on the Love of God, in St John of the Cross: Complete Poems and Prose Works, trans. Kateri Darcy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 273.
Prayer advances understanding of the distinction and relation between God and creatures – that is my main contention. Insofar as we pray, we learn to be a creature and thus not God; we appreciate in an experiential sense that there is a great distinction between God and us. Prayer as a doctrinally laden practice structures the exercise of our creatureliness in relation to our Creator. The pursuit of genuine creatureliness before the triune God assumes an exercise of prayer that rests on the metaphysics of God, the science of the divine being.

Prayer, moreover, helps us integrate description of God and prescription of a form of life. Description of the first principles of the divine life goes hand in hand with encouragement of a mode of life amenable to those truths. There needs to be, as Rowan Williams writes, ‘a theological way of life poised between penitence and wonder’, a way of creaturely being oriented to God in fear and adoration. Carnal minds, in other words, express accounts of the difference that are less than edifying. However, when we call upon God in prayer, we may open up fresh horizons of understanding regarding our uncreated Creator and our participation in him.

Our main interlocutor in this brief inquiry is Augustine. Augustine offers us deeply theocentric wisdom in regard to our creatureliness. In City of God, Augustine states that there are three things that we need to know about a created thing: 'who made it, how he [i.e. God] made it, and why he made it'. The answers Augustine gives – ‘God,’ ‘Through his word’, [and] ‘Because it is good’ – inform our exploration of the great difference. Accordingly, we turn now to God and to consideration of a prayerful enactment of our creatureliness before God.

The great difference

Our vocation as creatures is to live the distinction between ourselves and God. That vocation requires, however, a clear sense of what distinguishes us from God. The first thing that we say about ourselves, in distinction from God, is that we are made whereas God is not made. This means, among other things, that God does not become God in relation to us; we do not enhance God in any way, making God more than the one he has always been. God is our cause, uncreated goodness, beauty, unity, truth, light and life.

God cannot advance in being. The one who created us experiences neither increase in nor diminishment of being. The living Lord participates in nothing, neither Godhead nor divinity. The one who creates us has need of no one in order to be. Our Creator remains, in rest and repose, the one he has always been. This is not true of us, for we need this God in order to be. How then do we ‘advance in being’ towards this God? One of the ways in which we advance is prayer. As we pray, we are, it is hoped, made friendly to God. We live into our creatureliness. In prayer, we inhabit the very great difference between our Creator and ourselves, delighting in his uncreated goodness and love.

Augustine notes that ‘we resemble the divine Trinity in that we exist’. The resemblance is oblique, to be sure, but it is there, even on this side of the Fall.
does not sustain in being creatures that bear no resemblance to him and that are radically unlike him. Existence is a gift, and insofar as we exist, we resemble him who is existence itself. Our resemblance is heightened when we pray, for in prayer we are made friendly to our beginning and end, becoming more rather than less like God.

We awaken to God’s utter self-sufficiency in prayer, the magnificent truth that we are not necessary to our maker. If we pray, we then see that the distinction between our Creator and ourselves is greater than we could conceive, had we not prayed. Our Father to whom we pray is indeed ‘in heaven’. Heaven does not contain him; heaven is not superior to him; rather, he simply is above us, ‘in heaven’. We are not where he is, but he who is in heaven is present by his Spirit to us wherever we are. God is active on earth – ‘within in filling’, as Erich Przywara notes. In this respect, a key metaphysical principle with respect to God is assumed in prayer. God is above us but nonetheless not so above us that he does not also indwell us.

Let us think about that. Will is something true of God and creatures, although the great difference between God’s will and our own will far eclipses the similarities. God’s will is simple, whereas our will is not, distinct as it is from our intellect. We may know that something is right but nonetheless fail to do what is right. This is not the case with God. God’s will is identical to his essence. When we will what is contrary to God’s will, our will no longer conforms to its God-given call to will what is God’s. We thus compromise our creatureliness in relation to the God whose will is identical to all that he is. He who created us wills that we freely will him, imitating him, living ‘a life of love’, resembling him in what we say and do (Eph. 5.2).

When we pray, we live into a foundational truth regarding the Creator/creature distinction: that is, we are not our ‘own Good’; rather, God is. The good we will for ourselves is God. In praying that God’s will be done, we pray that we might persist less in what is of ourselves and rather more in what is of God, his goodness, truth and beauty. At the same time, we recognize that we will never enjoy goodness as God does, for God experiences his goodness as his own whereas any good that we have is a participation in his goodness.

Here we glimpse something of the extent to which prayer gives insight into the difference between ourselves and our Father. Our Father need not petition anyone for anything as he is in need of nothing. Novel elements never come into his nature, whereas a novel element comes into our nature – namely, the divine nature – when we pray in and through Christ. In prayer, we acquire more likeness to our cause, and the more we resemble our cause and share in his nature, the more we fulfil our vocation as creatures. Prayer prepares us for a relationship that exceeds – without contradicting – our natural capacities. Prayer bestows what John Calvin calls a ‘special grace’. To call Israel’s Lord ‘our Father’, the ‘I AM WHO I AM’, this is something for which we must be made fit, and the means by which we are made fit is the grace of prayer.
Within the context of the mystery of prayer, we see, however dimly, theological truths that we could not have seen before. We begin to glimpse, as Augustine notes, the extent to which God exists ‘in some other manner, utterly remote from anything we experience or could imagine’.15 We appreciate and feel our contingency, hallowing a God who does not change, who is purely actual, having no potential, knowing neither increase nor decrease in being. Theology proper unfolds, accordingly, as a fruit of the mystery of prayer. The truths intrinsic to our distinction from our Creator gloss the act of prayer itself.

We have a choice whether or not to pray. When we choose to pray, good arises, good analogous to our supreme good, God himself. Indeed, we become better, increasing rather than decreasing in likeness to the God in whose image we are made. We grow in intimacy with God, maturing as creatures, rejoicing in the God who cannot do what is contrary to himself, trusting in a God who cannot diminish and thus become less than the love he is. Accordingly, when we pray ‘your will be done’, we pray that what is essentially true of God might become true of us, that more truth, goodness, holiness, love, etc. be present and done in and among us rather than less. So, it is important to remember that God does not pray, whereas we must, if we are to know and love God. If we do not pray, we rescind in being, losing what we have been given, the gift of being itself.

We confess in prayer that we (and not God) are responsible for our defects. As Augustine notes, ‘God is the author of natures, though he is certainly not responsible for their defects.’16 God has no defects to own but we do: ‘And forgive our debts’ – this is our petition, not the Son of God’s.17 As we grow in the intimacy with God, we appreciate that much more the incorruptibility of God. God cannot cease to be light. As we become pure of heart, we grow in likeness to God. Like Christ, we become those for whom it is natural to express our love for our Father in prayer. We become in prayer what we are: creatures of our loving Father.18

As praying creatures, we recognize that the power to live our vocation as creatures is God’s. God’s power is never at odds with himself. It is identical to him, as is the case with his will. The same is not true for us, composite creatures that we are. Our power is at the disposal of our will, whereas God’s power is not at the disposal of any ‘part’ of God, for there are not any parts in God. Accordingly, to be a creature who lives in harmony with their Creator is a matter of using our free will to will what God wills.19

If we are to be made over in God’s likeness, we must live by God’s ‘own standard’.20 In living by God’s standards, we subject ourselves to him, thus becoming a little more like him. This is the key to our living well as creatures. Think, for a moment, about the question the Lord Jesus asks of Peter: ‘Do you love me?’21 When we love God, we use our will properly. Such loving, Augustine avers, is indicative of ‘a rightly divided will’.22 We may foolishly use our will to assert our power over and against God. God, however, never wills what is contrary to himself for God is love.

Because God is (again) simple, God cannot lose himself. This is not true of those who seek to live as God’s own. When we confess in prayer that power is
God’s, as with the kingdom and the glory, we appreciate the great difference between God and us, for God gives what he has without either losing or, for that matter, gaining himself. When we experience joy and its culmination in gladness, as God would have us do, we recognize that we may, in this life anyway, lose these things, for they are not coextensive with us. All that we can do, in life and in death, is give glory to God who is what he has and, in turn, gives.

To sum up this section, the great difference between God and us structures our prayer with God, resulting in ‘true tranquillity’ between us and God.23 The distinction from God no longer occasions distrust of God but is that into which we live. We see in prayer that it is good to be a creature of God. The great difference between created and uncreated evokes not resentment but trust, delight and, ultimately, love.

**Participation in God**

Prayer not only provides a remarkable view of our difference with respect to God but also encourages reflection regarding our participation in God. We who were created *ex nihilo* have the possibility of becoming distorted by sin, using our God-given free will to resist God. In praying Jesus’ prayer, we are asking that we who are so diminished in being – having been deranged by our sin – would receive God’s will and all that God is, enjoying a fresh participation in him. We were ‘created upright, that is, with a good will’, with God in view.24 We were not created bad. We were (and are) created to ‘live according to God’s will’.25 Crucially, when we live by God’s love, loving God in the love that God is, and when we live good lives, we see that God is, as Ian McFarland notes, the ‘kind’ of Creator who shares what he is.26 If we pray, we may glimpse what kind of Creator he is – that God is infinitely kind, willing that all enjoy a generous participation in him. Indeed, the glory of the gospel is that creatures are invited to share in what utterly exceeds them as creatures. This is grace. As McFarland writes, following the lead of Irenaeus, God ‘gives them [creatures] the glory of uncreated existence through God’s own loving presence to them’.27 We receive something of this presence, rightly, in prayer. And as we will what God wills in prayer, we receive a glimpse of God’s life, ‘the glory of uncreated existence’.

This register is important to maintain. Divine simplicity, rightly understood, teaches that God’s power does not ‘depend on God’s identity’, for God is his power – ‘yours is the power’.28 God is power itself. God the Father is power; God the Son and God the Spirit are as well. These three, because one essence is common to them, are power – not three powers but one. Moreover, God’s power is identical to God’s being. What the three share and communicate to us, and what we are to imitate, is common to them. This is how we understand the notion that God ‘gives them [i.e. creatures] the glory of uncreated existence’.29 The glory in which we creatures participate by grace is that which is proper to God by nature.

What prayer assumes is God’s self-subsistent being. Creatures subsist through another, by participation, whereas God subsists through himself; our being as
creatures is participated being. As Thomas Aquinas writes, ‘every being that is in any way is from God’.30 We are from God, and as such we enjoy a participation by virtue of our nature in him. If we pray, we appreciate afresh that God wills to be in us not only by nature but also by the grace of the Spirit. We are spoken into being by God by virtue of his goodness in order that we might walk with and receive a participation in him that utterly exceeds nature.

If such is the case, creatures ought to aspire towards goodness, towards what God is – this is the shape of our pilgrimage in relation to the God who does not aspire towards anything. Of course, we shall, in this life, always fall short. We and not God are on pilgrimage. The difference grounds the relation, and we live into that difference in the form of prayer, thereby enjoying a participation in him.

Conclusion

In this article I have endeavoured to show the relevance of prayer to the difference of God and creatures. Throughout this piece, I have sought to move beyond a descriptive mode of discourse, arguing that the difference itself assumes prayer with participation as its fruit. Prayer does not give us a model of the difference but instead creates a spiritually and intellectually charged atmosphere that illuminates our participation in the distinction. By considering prayer, the Creator/creature difference is opened up to us in a less formal and rather more believing way. We see that the truths of the distinction are so precious that they cannot be considered otherwise than in prayer. In praying, we receive something of the greatest good, which is God, and participation in the goods of his kingdom – ‘spiritual and immortal goods’, as Augustine winsomely calls them.31

Prayer assumes theology proper. The one whose existence is uncreated causes us to be in such a way that we might live as his. Prayer is the gift by which we mature in intellectual and spiritual relation to this great truth. Prayer forms the home in which we learn to imitate uncreated goodness and so to participate faithfully in it. By living devout and good lives we resemble our Creator, living out the great difference from him in ever increasing relatedness to him, thereby participating in our precious Saviour and the divine nature he gifts to us through his Spirit.

Notes

1. Rowan A. Greer, Broken Lights and Mended Lives: theology and common life in the early Church (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 2.
2. I am indebted to Robert Sokolowski’s account of ‘the Christian understanding of God and the world’, especially his sense that ‘the Christian distinction is the kind of thing that has to be lived before it can be stated’. See The God of Faith and Reason: foundations of Christian theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 36, 123.
3. Andrew Davison, Participation in God: a study in Christian doctrine and metaphysics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 40.
4. Rowan Williams, *Christ: the heart of creation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), p. 14.

5. The word ‘may’ in this sentence is important. This is because, as Lauren F. Winner has so helpfully pointed out, ‘prayer carries within itself the possibility of its own deformation’. This is true, she argues, not only of prayer but of other Christian practices such as baptism and Eucharist. Accordingly, ‘good Christian practices may, and inevitably sometimes will, do the very opposite of what those practices were made, in their goodness … to do’. Indeed, she would, I suspect, be somewhat critical of the largely Augustinian position I am advocating as I have left unexplored ‘the propensity for violence, for curvature’ in the act of prayer itself. The way in which to address her concerns would be, in part, to consider how the Spirit’s intercessory work discourages prayer unaligned with the prayer of our Lord. See Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: on wayward gifts, characteristic damage, and sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 61, 2, 14.

6. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, translated by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), XI.21 [hereafter *City*]. In appropriating Augustine, my focus is on metaphysical inquiry rather than the historical theological task of interpreting Augustine.

7. *City*, XI.23.

8. *City*, XII.9.

9. As Winner notes, following Aquinas, ‘the first thing we receive [in prayer] is friendship’. See Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 89.

10. *City*, XI.26.

11. *Analogia Entis: metaphysics: original structure and universal rhythm*, translated by John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 522.

12. Paul M. Blowers is right to draw attention to the performative dimension of Christian teaching on the Creator, but more specifically I draw attention to prayer as the performance required. See Chapter 9 of Paul M. Blowers, *The Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and creation in early Christian theology and piety* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 313–67.

13. *City*, XII.1.

14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1965), IV.XIV.9.

15. *City*, XI.21.

16. *City*, XIII.14.

17. Cf. Luke 23.34: Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’

18. I think that Winner would be at least mildly critical of the priority I am ascribing, following Augustine’s lead, to petitionary modes of prayer, however embedded in praise they may be. She suggests: ‘Perhaps confession – which, among other things, is diagnostic – should be the frame of all prayer.’ Indeed, ‘what we ought to bewail in confession is our inability to discern what is good for us’. See Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 91, 93.

19. Greer, *Broken Lights*, p. 30.

20. *City*, XIV.4.

21. See John 21.15–19.

22. *City*, XIV.7.
23. *City*, XIV.9.
24. *City*, XIV.27.
25. *City*, XV.1.
26. Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: a theology of creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p. 21.
27. McFarland, *From Nothing*, p. 13.
28. McFarland, *From Nothing*, p. 13.
29. McFarland, *From Nothing*, p. 13.
30. Anton C. Pegis (ed.), *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Volume 1: God and the order of creation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997); *Summa Theologica* 1.44.1.
31. *City*, XV.23.

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