

Religious fictionalism and the problem of evil

JON ROBSON

Department of Philosophy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
e-mail: jonvrobson@gmail.com

Abstract: The problem of evil is typically presented as a problem – sometimes *the* problem – facing theistic realists. This article takes no stance on what effect (if any) the existence of evil has on the rationality of theistic belief. Instead, it explores the possibility of using the problem of evil to generate worries for some of those who reject theistic realism. Although this article focuses on the consequences for a particular kind of religious fictionalist, the lessons adduced are intended to have more general application.

Philosophers of religion are certainly no strangers to the problem of evil. Barry L. Whitney's (1993) annotated bibliography of the issue contained over 4,000 entries, and interest in the problem has hardly abated in the decades following its publication. Yet there is (to run the risk of comical understatement) no clear consensus on what effect, if any, the existence of the various evils found in the world has on the rationality of theistic belief. This article will not contribute – except perhaps incidentally – to resolving this issue. Instead, it ploughs a much less familiar field and asks what significance the existence of such evils has for the rationality of adopting a *fictionalist* attitude towards God's existence.

Previous discussion of the problem of evil has – with some notable exceptions I consider below – focused almost exclusively on the dialectic between two rival positions concerning the attitude which adherents of theistic religions typically adopt towards the claim that God exists. The first of these, realism, maintains that the attitude in question is a belief (interpreted in a straightforward cognitivist sense) and that this belief is true. Those in the second camp, eliminative error theorists, agree with the realist concerning the nature of the relevant attitude but demur with respect to its truth, maintaining that the belief in question is false and that, as such, it should be abandoned. Yet, these positions are far from being the only game in town. One could, for example, maintain, with the eliminative error theorist, that the attitude in question is a false belief, but nonetheless recommend some response to this other than outright rejection.¹ Alternatively, one

could claim that this commitment is not (straightforwardly) a *belief*, but rather some non-cognitive state such as those proposed by expressivists in various domains.² In this article I focus on the prospects for a fictionalist construal of theistic attitudes, but my discussion is intended to illuminate some more general points concerning ways in which debates over the problem of evil might usefully be broadened so as to incorporate a wider range of views.

Fictionalism

The literature on fictionalism in various domains contains a number of different (and sometimes incompatible) accounts of what it is to be a fictionalist concerning some subject matter.³ Evaluating these competing accounts is, however, outside the scope of this article. As such I will merely stipulate that I intend ‘fictionalist’ to refer to those who

think that our attitudes towards a subject matter (such as God, or numbers) are not . . . beliefs, that they are not . . . truth-normed . . . though their contents are fully putatively fact-stating (that is, *representational* or *descriptive*) and therefore truth-apt. (Jay 2014: 209)

This is Christopher Jay’s account of the position taken by the hermeneutic fictionalist who maintains that people’s theistic attitudes are already fictionalist in nature (in contrast to the *revolutionary* fictionalist who proposes that people abandon their current, non-fictionalist, attitudes in favour of fictionalist successors), and it is fictionalism of this kind which will be my focus in what follows.⁴ The fictionalist claims that while the theist’s attitude towards the claim that God exists is truth apt, it is not a belief, and that the norms which govern such attitudes differ from those which govern belief (in particular, truth is not a necessary condition for their being licit). Yet, it is no part of fictionalism to claim that the attitudes in question *are* false. To say that beliefs are *truth normed* is not to say that they are *true* and, likewise, to deny that some attitude is truth normed is not to deny its truth.

So, what might motivate someone to accept fictionalism of the kind outlined here? Typically, one of the key motivations adduced for fictionalism in various domains is a desire to ‘preserve’ a particular practice in the face of pressing worries concerning realist interpretations of the practice. A fictionalist might argue that a realist construal of our theistic attitudes faces insurmountable metaphysical or epistemic problems, but that there are compelling reasons not to dispense with theistic thought and talk altogether (a claim I will return to below). Even if such arguments are cogent, though, they would only show that we have reason to adopt fictionalist attitudes (as the revolutionary fictionalist claims), rather than that anyone’s present attitudes are fictionalist in nature. Yet, we might think that if theistic realism really is as problematic as all that, then an appropriate principle of charity should make us reluctant to attribute such a view to others.⁵ Fictionalism can, however, also be motivated without presupposing that theism is false, or even that it couldn’t rationally be taken to be true. One might,

for example, argue that religious attitudes demonstrate a peculiar level of resilience to counterevidence which differentiates them from genuine beliefs (see e.g. Van Leeuwen 2014). I do not, however, want to dwell too long on the descriptive issue of whether any (or all) religious adherents actually possess the attitudes the fictionalist attributes to them. My main purpose in this article is, rather, to investigate whether someone who did possess such attitudes would have anything to fear from the problem of evil. I will, for ease of exposition, refer to such an individual as a ‘theistic fictionalist’, but I am aware that this is apt to be slightly misleading since someone could accept fictionalism with respect to theistic attitudes without themselves adopting such attitudes.

Fictionalism and the problem of evil

To this end, let us remind ourselves of the kind of propositions which are typically presented as part of the problem of evil, to wit:

T: The God of classical theism exists.

E: Evil (of a certain kind or intensity or . . .) exists.

T and *E* are, of course, ludicrously underspecified, but they will serve well enough for our purposes. To date, discussion of the problem of evil has centred on first asking whether *E* is inconsistent with (or unlikely given, or evidence against, or . . .) *T* and then on asking what consequences this has for the realist. However, my intention is to buck this trend and focus on the theistic fictionalist.⁶ The question I am interested in is what effect coming to believe *E* should have on someone who holds the kind of attitude the fictionalist posits with respect to *T*.⁷

Before considering how to respond, it is worth addressing an argument for the claim that the theistic fictionalist is able to sidestep this issue altogether. The realist is committed, qua realist, to believing that *T* is true and is also committed, qua minimally observant individual, to believing in the existence of various kinds of horrific evil. The *theistic fictionalist*, by contrast, need not accept *E* into her particular religious fiction even if she believes that *E* is, as a matter of fact, true. Instead, she could merely exclude some (or all) of the evils mentioned in *E* from her fiction. Robin Le Poidevin (1996, 121) suggests something in this vein, arguing that ‘we do not need to include the idea that the world contains an appalling amount of suffering’ in our religious fiction and that we can ‘simply avoid introducing anything which would result in tensions within the fiction’. Yet, Le Poidevin’s suggestion here strikes me as misguided.⁸ *T* is standardly held (whether fictionally or otherwise) as part of a wide range of other religious attitudes, attitudes which typically commit the religious adherent to the view that the universe contains some very dire evils. Indeed, as Marilyn McCord Adams (1993) points out, many theists are committed to the existence of some truly horrific evils – such as the suffering of the damned – which the areligious are not faced with. Even setting this aside, though, other aspects of religious practice seem threatened by Le

Poidevin's proposal. Consider, for example, the theistic fictionalist who learns of – that is, comes to *believe* in the existence of – some terrible tragedy. A typical response from an adherent of a theistic religion would implicate various theistic attitudes in, for example, praying that God would comfort the victim's families. This response would not, however, be available to the fictionalist, who expels any such horrific evils from their fictions. As such, it seems that – contra the fictionalist's claim – such an individual couldn't fully engage in ordinary religious practice.⁹

Intra-fictional constraints

So the fictionalist cannot merely sidestep the question; a response is needed. What response though? One possibility is to claim that the theistic fictionalist's acceptance of *E* should have no effect on their willingness to accept *T* irrespective of the extent to which *E*'s being true would reduce the probability of *T*'s being so. The most obvious motivation for such a view would be that there are no constraints on the propositions which we can make part of a fiction (religious or otherwise). If intended as a general claim about fictions, however, this view is clearly mistaken. Mere falsity is no bar to a claim's being part of a fiction, but that is not to say that there are no barriers whatsoever. I can legitimately accept as part of my reading of the Sherlock Holmes stories that Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street despite my knowledge that there has never been a residence at that address, but I cannot legitimately accept that Holmes lived in Berlin or that he was a sophisticated robot.¹⁰ And a complete absence of constraints seems equally implausible with respect to religious fictions. Recall, again, that we are considering the position of an ordinary religious adherent who holds fictionalist – rather than realist – attitudes towards *T*. There are, therefore, clear limits to the claims that such a person could accept as part of her fiction while still being in any sense a standard member of her religious community. Someone who maintained that God has only existed since last Thursday or who worshipped God by performing human sacrifices would certainly stand out from the crowd. There may, perhaps, be no limits to what an individual can make-believe with respect to God, but there are clearly limits to what they can accept as part of their religious fiction.

One suggestion for such a limitation would be intra-fictional consistency. We might suggest that while, in general, there can be excellent though inconsistent fictions (consider, for example, the famous inconsistency in the Holmes stories regarding the location of Watson's war wound), inconsistency is not an option for the *religious* fictionalist. One motivation for this view is the thought that religious attitudes typically connect up with action in a way in which ordinary fictions do not.¹¹ As such, someone who accepts inconsistent religious attitudes – for example that God both does and does not want them to perform some action – may well also face inconsistent demands concerning how they should act. If this is correct, though, then it had best not be the case that *T* and *E* are inconsistent since this would mean that the theistic fictionalist is unable to accept them both. A

consequence of this is that if there really are consistency constraints on religious fictions, then theistic fictionalists will encounter worries paralleling those of their realist counterparts with respect to the logical version of the argument from evil. The logical problem is rather old hat, though. Most who are party to the debate on the problem of evil – theist, atheist, and otherwise – now think that the evidential problem is where the real action is. Given this, merely adopting a consistency constraint might not generate any deep problem for the theistic fictionalist after all. Are there any other constraints, though, which the theistic fictionalist should adopt in addition to (or in place of) the consistency constraint? In what follows, I will consider the prospects for two promising contenders.

Truth-like constraints

The first kind of constraint I will consider are ones which most closely mirror those of the theistic realist. The fictionalist's attitudes are not truth-normed (though, again, this does not entail that they are not true), but this does not mean that they could not be subject to some norm in the vicinity.¹² We might claim, for example, that there is a norm according to which the attitudes in question must be plausible or verisimilitudinous or not known to be false or . . . There is much that could be said with respect to these different 'truth-like' norms and their relative merits (in particular, it is worth noting that a number of attitudes already discussed in the literature – such as Michael Bratman's (1992) notion of acceptance, or attitudes constrained by what van Fraassen (1980) calls 'empirical adequacy' – seem well suited to constraints of this kind), but I will not attempt to adjudicate between the different candidates here. Instead, I will merely offer a few general remarks on constraints of this kind.

One motivation for accepting such constraints might be the thought that, as Pascal (1995, 156) famously claimed, the evidence we have at our disposal neither mandates belief nor disbelief in (Christian) theism, but that we are, in some sense, forced to choose between accepting and rejecting theism. Both parts of this claim are, of course, highly controversial, but if our fictionalist accepts them, then she might think that her choice between the two options should not consist in believing either of them (since her evidence does not support such a move) but, rather, in adopting some weaker attitude towards her preferred view (one governed by the kind of truth-like norms we are considering). We need not, however, take our theistic fictionalist to be in anything like this Pascalian predicament. We might, instead, propose that the issue here is psychological, rather than theological. Perhaps the attitude theistic fictionalists possess is one which they are able to adopt towards propositions they don't take to be true, but one which they are unable to adopt towards a proposition they, say, know to be false (again, Bratman's notion of acceptance seems to fit the bill here).

Leaving the issue of motivation aside, and returning to the problem of evil, what should we say with respect to the relevance of truth-like constraints? The short

answer is that much has already been said on this subject (though not in a manner explicitly targeted at the fictionalist). The question of how probable *T* is given *E* has, of course, been the subject of considerable debate with respect to the problem of evil as it relates to the realist; and the project of defending the claim that the conjunction of *T* and *E* is true *for all we know* has also received its fair share of attention (see e.g. Draper (1989) for discussion of the former and van Inwagen (2008) for discussion of the latter). I will not, therefore, attempt to retread old ground and adjudicate precisely what we should say with respect to these issues. Suffice it to say that the theistic fictionalist who adopts one of the proposed truth-like constraints will have to address worries relating to the existence and nature of evil which very closely parallel those faced by their realist counterparts. Parallel but, perhaps, somewhat milder. For, we might reasonably maintain that meeting the kinds of truth-like standards proposed for fictionalist attitudes above is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition of the corresponding beliefs being licit.

Pragmatic constraints

I suggested above that it is typically very important for those who claim that we are (or should be) fictionalists with respect to some domain to show that the fictionalist can engage in certain relevant practices just as successfully as the realist can. Why is it important to preserve the relevant practices, though? Presumably, because we take there to be some advantage in retaining them, one which is not contingent on our being realists concerning the practices in question. One might reasonably think, then, that the fictionalist's attitudes should also be constrained by something like the likelihood of these attitudes accruing the relevant practical benefits. What kind of benefits might be relevant here?

First, there are straightforward practical benefits which have often been associated with religious practice; benefits not dependent on the truth of the relevant religious claims. It has been claimed, for example, that those who engage in regular religious practice are, on average, happier and longer lived than those who do not. Such claims are, of course, empirical ones and so not decidable by a priori philosophical theorizing. There does, however, seem to be some indication – as discussed in e.g. Pargament (2002) – that at least some of these claims are borne out by relevant evidence. Second, there are a range of putative benefits which are more difficult to measure empirically. For example, the oft-repeated claim that there are moral benefits to engaging in the relevant religious practices will – for obvious reasons – be difficult to test in any straightforward way. Even here, though, there may be some reason for optimism. Studies have, for instance, shown that (occurent) religious attitudes seem to make subjects less prone to cheating and more prone to altruistic behaviour (Norenzayan & Shariff (2008)).

If we accept, then, that our theistic fictionalist's attitudes should be constrained by such pragmatic considerations – and that she should (*ceteris paribus*) adopt

those attitudes which foster these benefits and reject those which do not – where does this leave her with respect to the problem of evil? This is not an easy question to answer. Even if we accept that there are pragmatic benefits to religious attitudes and that these provide constraints on our religious fictions, we would need much more information to know precisely what form these constraints would take. There are, after all, a number of religious traditions which do not accept *T* – as well as those which deny *E*. So, we would, again, need to look at empirical evidence to see whether adopting a religious attitude which combines *T* and *E* would have fewer (or more) benefits of the relevant kinds than one which only accepts one of the two. The upshot of this is that the question of how the theistic fictionalist who lets pragmatic considerations determine her religious attitudes should respond to the problem of evil is very much an empirical one, and not something which can be decided a priori. Further, it seems to be a question which (at present) we do not possess anything like enough data to answer reliably. So far as I can see, then, someone who is guided by pragmatic constraints with respect to her religious fictions should be agnostic with respect to the question of whether there is less (or indeed more) reason to admit *T* into her religious fiction given that she accepts *E*.

Summary

This article has served as a preliminary foray into exploring the impact which the problem of evil has for those who adopt a fictionalist attitude towards the claim that God exists. Previous work on this issue has tended to assume very quickly that ‘first order’ problems such as the problem of evil hold no terrors for such as these; I hope to have shown that this conclusion is premature. Unsurprisingly, given the preliminary nature of the enterprise, I have not argued for any precise conclusion concerning what the appropriate response is for a theistic fictionalist to take towards the evils in the world. I hope, though, to have shown that there is considerable interest in the project of exploring the relevance of the problem of evil for the theistic fictionalist (and, more broadly, for those other than realists and eliminative error theorists concerning theistic attitudes).¹³

References

- ADAMS, M. M. (1993) ‘The problem of hell: a problem of evil for Christians’, in E. Stump (ed.) *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 301–327.
- BRATMAN, M. E. (1992) ‘Practical reasoning and acceptance in a context’, *Mind*, **101**, 1–16.
- DRAPER, P. (1989) ‘Pain and pleasure: an evidential problem for theists’, *Nous*, **23**, 331–350.
- HARRISON, V. S. (2010) ‘Philosophy of religion, fictionalism, and religious diversity’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **68**, 43–58.
- JAY, C. (2014) ‘The Kantian moral hazard argument for religious fictionalism’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **75**, 207–232.
- KALDERON, E. M. (ed.) (2005) *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- LE POIDEVIN, R. (1996) *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2003) 'Theistic discourse and fictional truth', *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 3, 271–284.
- LEWIS, D. (1978) 'Truth in fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15, 37–46.
- MILLER, C. (2012) 'Atheism and theistic belief', in J. Kvanvig (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, IV (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 99–127.
- NORENZAYAN, A. & SHARIFF, A. F. (2008) 'The origin and evolution of religious prosociality', *Science*, 322, 58–62.
- PARGAMENT, K. I. (2002) 'The bitter and the sweet: an evaluation of the costs and benefits of religiousness', *Psychological inquiry*, 13, 168–181.
- PASCAL, B. (1995) *Pensées and Other Writings*, Honor Levi (tr.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- SCOTT, M. (2000) 'Wittgenstein and realism', *Faith and Philosophy*, 17, 170–190.
- VAN FRAASSEN, B. (1980) *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- VAN INWAGEN, P. (2008) *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- VAN LEEUWEN, N. (2014) 'Religious credence is not factual belief', *Cognition*, 133, 698–715.
- WHITNEY, B. L. (1993) *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil, 1960–1990* (New York: Garland).

Notes

1. For discussion of some of these options see Miller (2012).
2. See Scott (2000) for a discussion of such views.
3. For those interested in these debates the essays in Kalderon (2005) are an excellent starting point.
4. For a discussion of the contrast between hermeneutic fictionalism and other kinds of fictionalism see Jay (2014), 211–213. Jay's original presentation of the view states that the relevant attitudes are not evidence normed. I do not, however, wish – for reasons which will become clear below – to treat this as a non-negotiable commitment for the fictionalist.
5. Of course there are conflicting concerns regarding charity here since a fictionalist would typically have to claim that many religious adherents are mistaken concerning the nature of their own attitudes.
6. Although I intend my discussion to be broadly neutral concerning the effect of the problem of evil on the rationality of realism, I will assume, for the sake of argument only, that we should not take the problem to be entirely toothless. That is, I will assume that, *ceteris paribus*, the correct response to learning that *E* is to reduce (perhaps a great deal, perhaps only ever so slightly) our credence that *T*.
7. I assume for simplicity's sake that *E* is a genuine belief, but of course this is also a controversial matter.
8. As Le Poidevin (2003) later concedes.
9. There is, of course, a general worry (discussed by Harrison (2010), 55) concerning how the fictionalist should account for the rationality of practices such as petitionary prayer, but I will not address this here.
10. For one highly influential account of what we should accept as 'true in' a particular fiction see Lewis (1978).
11. It is worth noting, however, that this claim is controversial and that some, such as Van Leeuwen (2014), have used the lack of a reliable connection between religious attitudes and corresponding actions as a reason for thinking that such attitudes are not genuine beliefs.
12. I use 'norm' here very loosely so as to include e.g. psychological constraints on the relevant attitudes in addition to those with genuine normative force.
13. I would like to thank Sarah Adams, Anna Ichino, and the Audience at the *Religious Studies at 50* Conference for extremely useful comments on earlier versions of this article.