

Article

The Problem of Evil, Rhetoric, and the Drama of the Divine Economy

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Abstract

The contemporary debate over the problem of evil in analytic philosophy of religion is prone to focusing solely on the problem as an abstract dialectical issue that only concerns philosophers. However, this focus on abstract solutions to the problem of evil can seem to be less compelling in the face of personally experienced suffering, and it has given rise to newer approaches to the problem of evil, including anti-theodicy, which is the idea that theodicy itself is morally problematic. To remedy these issues, theists must turn to rhetoric to supplement theodicy. George Campbell's view of rhetoric provides great insights into possible solutions, showing how including biblical narratives in theodicy can provide more comprehensive and compelling explanations for why God allows evil.

Keywords: problem of evil; George Campbell; modern rhetoric; anti-theodicy; theodicy

1. Introduction

In analytic philosophy of religion, since the 1950s, the debate over the problem of evil has revolved around two major formulations of the problem: the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil. The logical problem of evil, inspired by J. L. Mackie, revolves around the supposed logical incompatibility of God's existence and the existence of evil (see [Mackie 1955](#); [Howard-Snyder 2013](#)). The evidential problem of evil, inspired by William Rowe, involves the conclusion that the amount of evil in the world makes it highly likely that God does not exist (see [Rowe 1979](#); [Oppy 2013](#)). In response to these arguments, theists have provided many answers to defend God's existence and to provide reasons why God might allow evil, including the free will defense, natural order defense, soul-making theodicy, and skeptical theism, among others (see [van Woudenberg 2013](#), pp. 187–89).

Rhetorically speaking, though, theists in this debate have mainly focused on dialectical approaches to the problem of evil, providing abstract arguments exploring the nature of evil and providing possible reasons why God might allow evil. Indeed, theists have even argued that theodicy does not involve emotionally satisfying answers to the problem of evil, and many see there being a distinction between what they call the philosophical (or intellectual) problem of evil and the pastoral (or emotional) problem of evil (see [Plantinga 1977](#), pp. 63–64; [Stackhouse 1998](#), p. 15; [Evans and Manis 2009](#), pp. 156–57; [Fitzgerald 2014](#), p. 240). William Lane Craig explains the distinction in this way:

It will . . . be helpful if we distinguish between the *intellectual* problem of suffering and the *emotional* problem of suffering. The intellectual problem concerns how to give a rational account of the co-existence of God and suffering. The emotional problem concerns how to dissolve the emotional dislike people have of a God



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who would permit such suffering. The intellectual problem lies in the province of the philosopher; the emotional problem lies in the province of the counselor. It's important to keep this distinction clear because the solution to the intellectual problem is apt to appear dry and uncomfortable to someone who is going through suffering, whereas the solution to the emotional problem is apt to appear superficial and explanatorily deficient to someone contemplating the question abstractly. (Craig 2004, pp. 112–13)

So, not only is there a distinction made between the philosophical and pastoral problems of evil, but it is thought it is the counselor's job, not the philosopher's, to address emotional reactions to evil.

Of course, in many situations, this distinction is warranted. In responding to the problem of evil, many theists have intentionally set out to provide mere defenses, which simply attempt to provide logically possible reasons for why God might allow evil, or particular evils (see Tierno 2006, p. 167). A famous example here is Alvin Plantinga's free will defense, which states it is possible that God wants to include human free will in creation, and this would entail the possibility of moral evil (Plantinga 1974, pp. 164–96). Defenses are intentionally weak, and they are only meant to show that God's existence and the existence of evil (or a particular evil) are not necessarily logically incompatible. Thus, since defenses are attempts merely to provide logically possible reasons for why God might allow evil, it would be unfair to demand that they provide holistic responses which also address emotional reactions.

However, many theists have attempted to provide theodicies, which are stronger than defenses. Influential examples include Hick's ([1977] 2010) soul-making theodicy; Swinburne's (1998) theodicy; and Plantinga's (2004) O felix culpa theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to provide a rational explanation for why God does allow evil, or a particular evil (see Tierno 2006, p. 167). As such, a theodicy should not only be valid and sound, but also compelling. It should not only provide a logical solution to the problem of evil, but also convince its hearers of its soundness. Granted, it is largely out of a philosopher's control whether people will find an argument compelling, but why would anyone not use all the tools available to make an argument as compelling as possible? So, this view of emotion having no place in theodicy seems unfounded and ignores the rich history of Western rhetoric and its role in defending theism. Without argument, this view demands that theodicy should only entail logical argumentation and refrain from including rhetoric. Yet, there is no good reason to a priori leave out emotionally satisfying answers to the problem of evil in theodicy, so theists should consider ways of providing holistic responses to the problem of evil that appeal to both the heart and the mind.

In this article, I attempt to take a step in this direction by discussing how Christian theodicy can be enhanced and made more compelling through taking a rhetorical approach (inspired by George Campbell) to theodicy that emphasizes the divine economy of salvation so often discussed by the ancient Church Fathers. First, I explain that ignoring the rhetorical nature of the problem of evil is problematic, especially since atheists have already been incorporating rhetoric in their approaches to the problem. Next, I briefly discuss George Campbell's view of rhetoric and how his framework of appealing to the understanding, imagination, passions, and will shows promise for the contemporary debate over the problem of evil. To build on Campbell's thought, I then discuss updated versions of his ideas, like Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, Monroe's Motivated Sequence, and contemporary research into the effectiveness of narrative. Finally, I provide a brief overview of the divine economy of salvation and how ancient Church Fathers, like Irenaeus, employed it in their responses to the problem of evil. Overall, I conclude that including the Bible in theodicy through discussing the divine economy of salvation can improve Christian theodicy by

supplementing dialectical answers to the problem of evil, ultimately appealing to the whole person.

2. Theodicy and Anti-Theodicy

As mentioned, in recent decades, the debate over the problem of evil mainly has revolved around logical argumentation, with atheists arguing that God does not exist because of the existence of evil in the world and theists arguing that God has morally sufficient reasons to allow evil. However, this focus on logical arguments has given rise to a newer approach to the problem, with some philosophers arguing that the very attempt to provide reasons for why God would allow evil is itself morally or pragmatically problematic.

Namely, in recent decades, philosophers have begun to take an approach to the problem of evil known as *anti-theodicy* (see [Trakakis 2013](#); [Betenson 2016](#)). A major objection to the task of theodicy from anti-theodacists is that theodicy is practically worthless because it does nothing to emotionally ease the pain from experienced suffering. For example, regarding the philosophical/pastoral distinction, Nick Trakakis argues that

...this quickly leads one down the path of metaphilosophy. For if one conceives of philosophy as something more than a purely theoretical enterprise, and perhaps as something that has an inextricable personal and social dimension, then any such hard-and-fast demarcation between the theoretical and practical problems of evil will seem dubious and artificial, if not also morally and socially harmful. ([Trakakis 2013](#), pp. 372–73)

In other words, since one of the major goals of philosophy is to lead someone on the right path to the good life, it does not make sense to say there is more than the philosophical problem of evil since any philosophical response should satisfy the whole person, not just the intellect. While the goal of philosophy has been debated throughout the history of Western philosophy, Trakakis's point is especially pertinent in the context of the problem of evil as most people, academics or not, seek answers to the problem of evil because of personally experienced suffering.

In addition to this pragmatic objection to theodicy, anti-theodacists mainly object to theodicy on moral grounds. Tony [Betenson \(2016, pp. 57–61\)](#) lists six major moral objections to theodicy that anti-theodacists have made:

1. Theodicy demonstrates a stark moral insensitivity;
2. Theodicy adopts too detached a perspective;
3. Theodicy exhibits an irremissible moral blindness;
4. Theodicy uses the wrong moral theory;
5. Theodicy treats people as mere means, not ends in themselves; and
6. Theodicy adds to the evils of the world.

Among these, considering the philosophical/pastoral distinction, the first three objections are the most relevant for this article. The first two objections build on each other and lead to the third objection.

First, anti-theodacists argue that dialectical responses to the problem of evil are insensitive to horrendous evils that people have experienced firsthand ([Betenson 2016](#), p. 57). Trakakis explains this objection when he says,

...theodicies turn a blind eye to what seems obvious and clear to everyone else—that it is at least possible, if not the sad truth of the matter, that there is much evil and suffering in our world that is gratuitous, pointless, or unnecessary with respect to the fulfillment of God's purposes. One of the fundamental givens of our moral experience, it seems, is that there are evils that strike us as unredeemable,

incomprehensible, and inexplicable—not in the (skeptical theist) sense that there are evils that may have some point that we cannot uncover, but rather that many evils are such that they have absolutely no point at all. (Trakakis 2013, p. 365)

Trakakis is emphasizing the idea of horrendous (or gratuitous) suffering, which is suffering endured by humans that is thought to neither produce (nor maintain) a higher or equal good or prevent an equal or worse evil. He is arguing that experienced suffering produces a phenomenological sense that some suffering simply has no point. To argue, for example, that the Holocaust might have been allowed to bring about a greater good is to be insensitive to the horrendous suffering experienced by Holocaust victims (Phillips 2005, pp. 37–40). Rabbi Irving Greenberg finds a vivid picture of this kind of objection in the writings of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel:

In short, the Holocaust poses the most radical counter-testimony to both Judaism and Christianity. Elie Wiesel has stated it most profoundly:

Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

The cruelty and the killing raise the question whether even those who believe after such an event dare talk about God who loves and cares without making a mockery of those who suffered. (Greenberg 1989, pp. 307–8)

For Wiesel, the firsthand experience of such great evil produced in him something so strong as he would call it a knowledge that God does not exist. As the anti-theodist emphasizes, theists rarely, if at all, attempt to provide explanations that take this level of evil seriously.

Second, anti-theodists similarly argue that the application of the justification for God allowing evil in any particular situation is too detached from the reality of experienced suffering (Betenson 2016, p. 58). So, not only is it claimed that theodicies are insensitive to experienced evil, but they are also said to entail a very impersonal application when considering actual suffering. A theodist, for example, might argue that for all we know, God never allows evil unless it brings about a greater good, and the anti-theodist will emphasize that this kind of justification for evil is easy to say in the office or in the classroom, but it is powerless to explain evil in reality. Betenson explains that theists approach theodicy from a detached “God’s-eye-view” of the world:

... a view of the world from an eternal point of view, *sub specie aeternitatis*; a view of the world as if from no place within it. This removes many of the subjective elements that (one might think) are crucial to the meaningfulness of many of our evaluative claims. There is something monstrous about an utterly objective and impersonal moral machine, calculating the costs of innocent suffering against the benefits of greater goods. Or at least, this attitude would be monstrous in a human being. (Betenson 2016, p. 58)

So, as Betenson emphasizes, it looks good on paper to provide a theodicy with goods that a loving God wants to preserve, but when thinking about the reality of first-personal suffering, this kind of impersonal cost–benefit analysis becomes morally repugnant. Greenberg

provides an example of this objection to theodicy as well; recalling Wiesel's experiences, Greenberg says,

The Holocaust challenges the claims of the standards that compete for modern man's loyalties. Nor does it give simple, clear answers or definitive solutions. To claim that it does is not to take burning children seriously. This surd will—and should—undercut the ultimate adequacy of any category, unless there were one (religious, political, intellectual) that consistently produced the proper response of resistance and horror at the Holocaust. No such category exists, to my knowledge. . . . Let us offer, then, as working principle the following: No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children. (Greenberg 1989, pp. 314–15)

As Greenberg suggests, it is one thing to provide a blanket justification for God allowing moral evil in the world, but it is another to look someone in the eye and give the same justification in the presence of unspeakable horror. If a philosophical or theological explanation for evil is to be offered, it must be powerful enough to satisfy those who have or are experiencing extreme suffering.

Finally, these two objections build on each other and produce the third objection, which is that theodicies seem to exhibit a moral blindness (Betenson 2016, p. 59). If the traditional theodicy merely provides impersonal reasons for God allowing abstract suffering, this seems to ignore so much actual and experienced suffering in the world to the point it appears to be blind to suffering. Along these lines, Kenneth Surin has argued,

It is precisely the sign of a corrupt mind to speak easily of two different realities, say, the world of the Flat Earth Society on the one hand and the world of Auschwitz on the other, as if they are interchangeable. To be 'open-minded' about certain realities, and 'more tellingly' to *insist* on retaining such a contemplative disposition, is to show oneself to be incapable of making certain exigent moral discriminations. In the worst of cases, this incapacity to acknowledge that a particular reality is mind-stopping betokens an irremissible moral blindness, in less serious occurrences it testifies to a real lack of moral imagination, to an unshakeable moral coarseness. (Surin [1986] 2004, pp. 83–84)

So, it is not just that traditional theodicies overlook so much real, horrendous, experienced suffering, but because they impersonally neglect so much suffering, their practice seems to train the theist's mind to overlook suffering to the point of culpability.

Since many theists are explicit about the distinction between philosophical and pastoral responses to the problem of evil, though, it is notable that they are not attempting to provide both intellectually and emotionally satisfying theodicies. These objections from anti-theodicians are not meant to show that theodicies are invalid or unsound. But it should be clear that there is a growing number of people who find theodicies extremely unconvincing. So, it would be unwise for theists to continue to maintain a philosophical/pastoral distinction and to think it is solely the counselor's job to diminish or turn away negative emotional reactions to God's allowance of evil. Of course, logical argumentation is crucial and a necessity when answering the charges leveled against God from evil. But more is required if theists want to fully address both the logical and emotional problems that evil causes.

So, a much-needed solution to the problem theists are facing is the addition of rhetorical responses to evil that include narrative and other rhetorical devices designed to appeal to the whole person. Some philosophers might not like this and argue that appeals to the emotions have no place in philosophy, but these philosophers should heed the example of anti-theodicians, who it has been shown are skilled at including powerful anecdotes that

produce strong emotional responses from readers. It is not just that recent responses to the problem of evil are lacking in rhetorical content, but also, the debate seems to be a one-sided affair in which atheists and anti-theodiscists are the only ones using immersive and emotionally stirring examples to their advantage.

3. George Campbell on Rhetoric and Persuasion

Of course, Aristotle taught that, in contrast to dialectic (which only involves logical argumentation between experts), good rhetoric involves logical argumentation (*logos*), appealing to the emotions of the audience (*pathos*), and appealing to the reliability of the speaker (*ethos*) (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.2). But philosophers who do not specialize in rhetoric need more rhetorical concepts than this, especially when utilizing rhetoric for theodicy. Thankfully, the study of rhetoric has come a long way since Aristotle, and there has been recent scholarship providing insights into how rhetoric could be used, even in philosophy of religion.

For example, the thought of the modern rhetorician George Campbell shows promise for theodicy and deserves attention. Campbell saw that many of the rhetorical concepts from the ancients were good, but his project was to update rhetoric based on a modern understanding of the mind (see Walzer 2003, pp. 33–48). He also made advances in rhetoric with his theory regarding the two stages of persuasion.

First, Campbell attempted to analyze rhetoric using an updated understanding of the human mind. Aristotle's rhetoric mainly utilized logic and enthymemes designed to be understandable to lay audiences. But Campbell wanted to focus on all aspects of the mind as conceived by most modern philosophers (Walzer 2003, p. 40). As such, Campbell argued that rhetoricians should craft their speeches to appeal to the understanding, imagination, passions, or the will. He mentions this in the very beginning of his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*:

In speaking there is always some end proposed, or some effect which the speaker intends to produce in the hearer. The word *eloquence* in its greatest latitude denotes, "That art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end." All the ends of speaking are reducible to four; every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will. (Campbell [1776] 2013, pp. 25–26)

So, depending on the purpose of the speech, Campbell argues that the rhetorician should focus on appealing to the aspect of the mind that will produce the desired result.

However, Campbell does not think most speeches will focus on only one aspect of the mind, because he argues that the latter speeches aimed at the imagination, passions, and the will all have their foundations in the previous types of speeches. For example, Campbell explains,

In general it may be asserted, that each preceding species, in the order above exhibited, is preparatory to the subsequent; that each subsequent species is founded on the preceding; and that thus they ascend in a regular progression. Knowledge, the object of the intellect, furnisheth materials for the fancy [imagination]; the fancy culls, compounds, and, by her mimic art, disposes these materials so as to affect the passions; the passions are the natural spurs to volition or action, and so need only to be right directed. (Campbell [1776] 2013, pp. 28–29)

Thus, if a speech is meant to move the passions and influence the will, it must also enlighten the understanding and engage the imagination. Accordingly, Campbell discusses the passions and rhetorical strategies for engaging the passions in several chapters in *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, especially Chapters VII, VIII, and IX.

Campbell does seem to maintain the ancient distinction between dialectic and rhetoric. His idea that the will cannot be moved apart from appealing to the understanding and emotions might appear as if it is requiring that all persuasive speech must be rhetorical. However, in *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, he distinguishes between purely intellectual argument and persuasive speech. For example, he says,

When a speaker addresseth himself to the understanding, he proposes the *instruction* of his hearers, and that, either by explaining some doctrine unknown, or not distinctly comprehended by them, or by proving some position disbelieved or doubted by them.—In other words, he proposes either to dispel ignorance or to vanquish error. In the one, his aim is their *information*; in the other, their *conviction*. Accordingly the predominant quality of the former is *perspicuity*; of the latter, *argument*. (Campbell [1776] 2013, p. 29)

Thus, Campbell's view of rhetoric does make room for persuasive speech that is solely directed at the understanding, and this seems to be what the ancients would have viewed as *logos*. However, in his chapters on moving the passions, Campbell argues that appealing to the passions can make for more powerful arguments.

It is also in these chapters that Campbell made progress with his theory of persuasion. If a speaker wants to persuade his audience, Campbell argues that appealing to the emotions (through the imagination) is a must because it is the imagination that makes ideas vivid, and it is the emotions that animate and give these ideas power:

To conclude; when persuasion is the end, passion also must be engaged. If it is fancy which bestows brilliancy on our ideas, if it is memory which gives them stability, passion doth more, it animates them. Hence they derive spirit and energy. To say, that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions, is but at best a kind of specious nonsense. The coolest reasoner always in persuading, addresseth himself to the passions some way or other. This he cannot avoid doing, if he speak to the purpose. To make me believe, it is enough to show me that things are so; to make me act, it is necessary to show that the action will answer some end. (Campbell [1776] 2013, pp. 199–200)

So, appealing to the emotions not only makes an argument more persuasive, it also is necessary if a speaker wants to persuade the audience to act. Understanding and believing a concept is one thing, but getting the audience to act on that concept is another, and it is crucial to appeal to the imagination and the emotions to get an audience to act on the argument it hears.

Much contemporary psychological research supports and expands upon Campbell's view of the mind and its relation to the emotions. For example, contemporary researchers have argued that the emotions play a major role in decision-making (Isen 2008) and the desire for social affiliation (Fischer and Manstead 2016). For one, positive feelings, along with their coinciding physiological effects, are believed to improve critical thinking in general, making people more flexible decision-makers (Isen 2008). Moreover, positive emotions are believed to not only lead to the desire for social affiliation (i.e., the desire for relationships) but also strengthen social affiliation (Fischer and Manstead 2016).

In regard to the role of emotions and social functions, psychologists have identified many emotions thought to produce beneficial effects beyond the individual to a group or society. These emotions are called "moral emotions," and they include guilt, pity, embarrassment, shame, pride, awe, contempt, indignation, moral disgust, and gratitude (see Moll et al. 2008, p. 2). Moral emotions are extremely relevant to rhetoric because philosophers have generally agreed that emotions involve intentionality; that is, emotions are always about things (e.g., fear of heights; sadness from a loss) and are triggered through

cognitive processes involving the senses and/or thought (see [Goldie 2007](#), pp. 930–31; [Solomon 2008](#), p. 12). Indeed, there is a longstanding tradition of philosophers who have argued that emotions are directly linked to cognitive mental states, such as interpretations, judgments, or thoughts (see [Goldie 2007](#), pp. 934–35; [Scarantino 2016](#), pp. 24–36). In other words, one's understandings and beliefs about one's physical and social circumstances is largely the source of the emotions one experiences. This view of emotions is known as *cognitive theory* (see [Goldie 2007](#), p. 934) or the *evaluative tradition* (see [Scarantino 2016](#), p. 24), and it has several contemporary defenders (see [Nussbaum 2001](#); [Solomon 2003](#)). So, both logical arguments and rhetorical examples can play a role in producing moral emotions as far as they can affect the beliefs of an audience.

It is known that moral emotions are experienced not only because of an individual's physical or social states, but also because of the perceived physical or social states of others. For example, Martin Hoffman defines "empathy" as "an emotional state triggered by another's emotional state or situation, in which one feels what the other feels or would normally be expected to feel in his situation" ([Hoffman 2008](#), p. 440). He says that empathy plays a major role in producing moral emotions that motivate people to help others:

The overwhelming evidence... is that most people feel empathetically distressed and motivated to help [when seeing others in distress]: The greater and the more intense their empathetic distress is, and the more intense the victim's actual distress is, the quicker they are to help. Moreover, their empathetic distress decreases more quickly and they feel better when they help than when they don't. ([Hoffman 2008](#), p. 440)

So, when people perceive the suffering and/or danger of others, they naturally are motivated to help. Not only are they motivated to help, but they also feel better if they actually help as opposed to doing nothing. In support of Campbell's thought, two common ways of arousing empathetic distress (and its coinciding moral motivation) are *verbally mediated association* and *perspective taking* ([Hoffman 2008](#), p. 440). Perspective taking is when someone imagines the plight of another, invoking the emotions of the perceived victim in addition to the empathetic distress, and this distress can be triggered either directly or verbally (i.e., verbally mediated association). Thus, contemporary research supports the notion that people can be motivated to act through both argumentation and rhetorical examples.

Aside from contemporary psychological research, Campbell's view of rhetoric has been supported and expanded upon, and many of his ideas are still relevant today. Namely, his idea that argumentation is more compelling when the imagination and emotions are engaged, as well as his idea that engaging the emotions is necessary for persuasion, are both relevant ideas for the contemporary debate over the problem of evil. But before showing how Campbell's ideas can be applied through the Bible and the divine economy of salvation, it will first be good to discuss more detailed versions of Campbell's ideas and their applicability to the philosophy of religion.

4. Rhetoric and Philosophy of Religion

Three contemporary rhetorical concepts that affirm Campbell's ideas and have relevance for the debate over the problem of evil are Eleonore Stump's emphasis on including biblical narrative in theodicy, Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, and Monroe's Motivated Sequence. First, Stump has argued that including narrative in theodicy (and philosophy of religion in general) is advantageous because narrative can communicate ideas that are difficult (if not impossible) to communicate from an analytical, third-person point of view ([Stump 2001, 2010](#), pp. 39–63; [2022](#), pp. 143–68; [Stump and Wolfe 2024](#)). Stump's argument plays on the contemporary epistemological distinction between types of knowledge (see [Hetherington n.d.](#)). Usually, dialectical arguments are made with third-personal

propositions about the world. These types of propositions are the basis for *propositional knowledge* (i.e., knowledge of facts), which is the major concern of contemporary epistemology. However, epistemologists have explored other types of knowledge, including *knowledge by acquaintance*. Knowledge by acquaintance is a type of knowing about the world that is obtained directly, apart from considering propositions. Knowledge gained through the senses is an oft-emphasized example of knowledge by acquaintance. It is one thing to understand the physics of color cognition, including the nature of light waves and the inner workings of the eyes, brain, and nervous system, but it is quite another to directly experience colors, such as the redness of an apple. Knowledge by acquaintance is distinguished from propositional knowledge in examples like color cognition because it is impossible to communicate the what-it-is-likeness to experience the color red through the use of propositions.

Noting this distinction, Stump argues that narratives, and especially biblical narratives, can aid in theodicy because they can demonstrate suffering and how it is resolved, and they can do so in a way that third-personal propositions are powerless to do. Stump explains,

The external description of a case of suffering, without insight into the inner life of the sufferer, can make the project of theodicy seem difficult or impossible. The external but superficial description of the suffering of Mary of Bethany, for example, is that her brother Lazarus was allowed to die when he could so easily have been healed by Jesus, who failed to come to his aid. . . Described in these ways, the suffering in question can look indefeasible, incapable of being redeemed. . . But, set in a context that includes the psychology and biography of the sufferer, the suffering acquires a very different look. In that context, the point of the suffering is not at all blankly unintelligible. (Stump 2010, p. 373)

In other words, through biblical narrative, readers gain personal and relational knowledge by acquaintance of the characters and events, which is something that cannot be communicated through mere third-personal propositions. Additionally, readers can experience the characters enduring and resolving suffering as if the readers were present to the events.

Stump's argument was not addressed to anti-theodicy, but it should be clear how her ideas support Campbell's and can help to address the concerns of anti-theodicy. Of course, narrative can appeal to the imagination and emotions as Campbell suggests, but also, Stump shows that narrative just might be indispensable in theodicy, as narrative communicates knowledge that is unobtainable through dialectic.

Another concept that is relevant to narrative, rhetoric, and the problem of evil is Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm. In the 1980s, Fisher (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989) formulated a rhetorical theory designed to supplement the rational-world paradigm of Western thought that originated with the ancient Greeks. Basically, the *rational-world paradigm* is Fisher's label for the understanding of human nature according to traditional Western philosophy; this paradigm entails viewing humans as rational animals who ought to communicate and make decisions based on logic supplemented with rhetoric. The rational-world paradigm is grounded in five main principles:

1. Humans are essentially rational beings;
2. The paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is argument;
3. The conduct of argument is ruled by the dictates of situations—legal, scientific, legislative, public, and so on;
4. Rationality is determined by subject matter knowledge, argumentative ability, and skill in employing the rules of advocacy in given fields; and
5. The world is a set of logical puzzles which can be resolved through appropriate analysis and application of reason conceived as an argumentative construct. (Fisher 1984, p. 4)

Overall, the rational-world paradigm views argument as the chief means by which humans obtain truth and achieve their *telos* as rational animals (Fisher 1984, p. 4). Fisher does not reject the rational-world paradigm but argues that it focuses on one aspect of human nature. Following thinkers like Kenneth Burke and Alasdair MacIntyre, Fisher believes humans are essentially storytellers (*homo narrans*). As such, humans most often learn about the world and share information through stories. So, logical argumentation is but one aspect of how humans relate to the world, and ultimately, logical concepts and arguments are abstracted from memories of the stories of each individual's life or the lives of others. Fisher believes a new paradigm should be considered, one that includes *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*, and importantly, *mythos*. This narrative paradigm Fisher proposes is based on five principles that contrast with the rational-world paradigm:

1. Humans are essentially storytellers;
2. The paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is “good reasons” which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media;
3. The production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character. . . ;
4. Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings; and
5. The world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation. (Fisher 1984, pp. 7–8)

One of the key concepts for Fisher's narrative paradigm is the concept of *good reasons*, which Fisher (1984, p. 1) defines as “those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical.” To illustrate, he says that *The Great Gatsby* is an example of a story that provides good reasons to reject or mistrust the “materialist myth of the American Dream” (Fisher 1984, p. 1). So, although *The Great Gatsby* does not contain logical arguments against materialism, the characters and events in the story nonetheless communicate that materialism ought to be rejected.

Fisher's narrative paradigm has been debated since he proposed it in 1984 (see Stache 2017). Regardless of the debate, though, the paradigm highlights the power that narrative has to compel apart from logical argumentation. For example, if a parent wants to convince his or her child that saving money for retirement is important, the parent can give a presentation with charts showing how much the average person needs to save for retirement and showing the percentage of people who fail to save enough for retirement, along with graphs showing how retirement investments can grow over time with monthly deposits; or, alternatively, the parent can tell a story of how the child's grandparents did not understand the importance of saving, fell into poverty in their old age, and struggled to afford medicine, healthcare, and even food. While logical arguments have their place, stories can supplement logical arguments, and in many cases, stories can compel audiences in ways that logical arguments might not.

As the above discussion on anti-theodicy shows, anti-theodacists are already using narrative in their charges against theodicy. Indeed, these narratives provide vivid and powerful examples of suffering that might make abstract justifications of suffering seem callous and unattached. Also, these narratives can have not only a great emotional effect on the reader, resulting in strong, negative emotions getting directed toward theism and theodicy, but also, the narratives can provide “good reasons” for mistrusting the God of theism. Moreover, these anti-theodacist narratives are presented without resolution; intentionally or not, anti-theodacists are presenting lopsided narratives that either leave out reconciled suffering or present suffering as inherently irreconcilable. Thus, theists need to realize that it is a significant and unnecessary handicap to omit narratives from theodicy. Not only do narratives communicate knowledge that is not available through dialectic

alone, but they also can show that even seemingly horrendous suffering can be resolved in emotionally satisfying ways.

In addition to the above-mentioned benefits, it is also good to note that contemporary scientists speak highly of the usefulness of narrative. Researchers have found that including narrative in entertainment–educational messages leads to positive attitude change, increased awareness of health risks, and the intent to behave more socially (see [Moyer-Gusé 2008](#); [McQueen et al. 2011](#); [de Graaf et al. 2012](#)). Notable among contemporary studies is a study performed by [Bullock et al. \(2021\)](#). In light of contemporary findings regarding narrative and persuasion, [Bullock et al. \(2021\)](#) theorized that positive results in communication with narrative are the result of what they call *processing fluency*, which is the idea that narratives make it easier for audiences to process new information. They believe processing fluency has more explanatory power for the effectiveness of narrative communication over something known as *identification*, which is the process in which a narrative allows an audience member to adopt the perspective of a character and view events from the character’s perspective ([Bullock et al. 2021](#)).

[Bullock et al. \(2021\)](#) tested their hypothesis, and their studies confirmed that narrative messages were easier to process than non-narrative messages, resulting in more positive attitudes toward the narrative messages. Their findings did not show a clear correlation between narrative and non-narrative messages regarding identification, and they concluded that the best explanation for the effectiveness of narrative communication is processing fluency ([Bullock et al. 2021](#)). Regardless, good takeaways from this study are that Campbell’s ideas have scientific support, and, if nothing else, including narrative in theodicy can help make the abstract, philosophical discussion easier to understand for both academics and lay-persons alike.

One final contemporary rhetorical concept that needs discussing is Monroe’s Motivated Sequence. As shown above, Campbell argued that persuasion to action necessitates appealing to the imagination and the emotions. Over the years, this approach was eventually refined, and today it is known as the motivated sequence pattern of arrangement ([Bizzell and Herzberg 2001](#), p. 889). First developed by Alan Monroe in the 1930s, the motivated sequence is a five-step arrangement pattern designed to arouse an audience’s attention and end with a call to action ([O’Hair et al. 2015](#), p. 375; see [Monroe 1935](#)). The following list includes the steps as explained by [O’Hair et al. \(2015, pp. 375–78\)](#):

1. Attention—addresses listeners’ core concerns, making the speech highly relevant to them.
2. Need—isolates and describes the issue to be addressed.
3. Satisfaction—identifies the solution.
4. Visualization—provides the audience with a vision of anticipated outcomes associated with the solution.
5. Action—the speaker asks audience members to act according to their acceptance of the message.

As is clear, the motivated sequence is a detailed, step-by-step pattern of arrangement for anyone wanting to rouse an audience to action. Campbell’s influence is apparent as the speaker is asked to address the audience’s understanding, imagination, and emotions before calling the audience to action. O’Hair et al. recommend the sequence for its persuasive power and for its ability to supplement argumentation:

This time-tested variant of the problem-solution pattern of arrangement is particularly effective when you want the audience to do something—buy a product, donate to a cause, and so forth. Yet it is equally useful when you want listeners to reconsider their present way of thinking about something or continue to believe as they do but with greater commitment. ([O’Hair et al. 2015](#), pp. 375–76)

So, not only has Campbell's theory of persuasion gained acceptance in the communications theory community as the motivated sequence is widely taught in speech communication textbooks, but also, it has produced a refined arrangement pattern that shows rhetorical effectiveness and has stood the test of time (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001, p. 899).

It might not be clear why it would be necessary to include something like Monroe's Motivated Sequence in theodicy. Including narrative in theodicy seems like it will be effective enough, and it might not be apparent why a call to action would be needed while defending theism against the problem of evil. However, this will be made clear in the next section, where various biblical narratives will be discussed and it will be shown how their use displays Campbell's thought, as well as supplements theodicy.

5. Biblical Narrative, the Divine Economy of Salvation, and the Problem of Evil

This section will loosely follow the order of rhetorical strategies that were discussed in the previous section. First, a biblical narrative that coincides with theodicy will be discussed, and second, the divine economy of salvation will be discussed in view of Monroe's Motivated Sequence. Throughout, the advantages of these approaches for theodicy will be emphasized.

Stump has already broken ground in the attempt to include biblical narratives in theodicy. In her *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, she uses the stories of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany to show how each story can demonstrate different kinds of suffering and how suffering was reconciled in the characters' lives (Stump 2010, pp. 175–368). Each of these provide great examples of how narrative can enhance theodicy.

Despite Stump's use of the story of Job, however, it will be good to discuss this story and how it fulfills the purpose of a theodicy-enhancing narrative as a case study for this article. As most people know, the story of Job begins with Job being described as a wealthy, righteous, and flourishing man with a wife, ten children, and many possessions (Job 1:1–3). However, God tests Job through allowing Satan to destroy Job's possessions, his children, and his health (Job 1:6–2:8). After three of Job's friends try to console him and rationalize his unfortunate situation, God eventually appears and provides a response to Job and his friends (Job 2:11–37:24). God tells Job many things, but God's main point is that Job does not know what it takes to create and run the universe; God alone knows and cares for all of creation, and Job is unqualified to question God's reasons for allowing Job's losses (Job 38:1–41:34) (see Hartley 1988, p. 525; Clines 2010, p. 311; Smick 2010, p. 312; Webb 2023, p. 419).

It was mentioned above that narrative can enhance theodicy by making theodicies come alive, communicating knowledge that is unobtainable through mere dialectic, and making theodicies easier to understand. The story of Job is helpful because it can do all three.

Not much has been said in regard to particular theodicies, but one attempt to defend theism that was briefly mentioned is *skeptical theism* (Rudavsky 2013). Skeptical theism is the theistic claim that human beings do not have epistemological access to God's reasons for allowing evil. The skeptical theist says that even in cases of seemingly gratuitous suffering, for all we know, God has morally justifiable reasons for allowing that suffering. At the very least, atheists are not warranted to conclude that there can be no justifiable reason for God allowing any particular instance of suffering, because a lack of an apparent reason is not evidence that there does not exist one. It would require the mind of God for anyone to be certain there is no morally justifiable reason for God's allowance of a particular instance of

suffering, but since no human has the mind of God, no one can be warranted in concluding that God does not exist based on apparently gratuitous suffering.

As abstract and as detached as this theodicy may be, the story of Job enhances this theodicy in several ways. First, listening to God's description of His deep knowledge of creation and what it takes to sustain it can provide a tangible explanation of the major point of skeptical theism. When hearing what God has to say to Job, it quickly becomes clear how little humans know about the workings of creation and how little we could know about His reasons for what He does and does not allow.

Second, as mentioned by [Stump \(2010, pp. 177–228\)](#), the dialogue between Job and God makes it possible for readers to identify with Job and place themselves into a second-personal narrative between them and God. This type of narrative can bring out different types of knowledge not possible when simply discussing seemingly gratuitous suffering in the third person. Readers can identify and empathize with Job's suffering (imagining it as something worse, equal, or less than what they have experienced), but also, they can experience in their imaginations what it would be like to confront an almighty God who is the Lord of all creation. It is easy to complain about God outside of His presence, but likely few people will imagine themselves standing strong in God's awesome presence after reading the story of Job. Seeing Job's awe of God and subsequent repentance can provide "good reason" for readers to trust God as Job did in spite of a lack of an explanation for Job's suffering.

Finally, the story of Job provides an example of how Job dealt with and ultimately reconciled his suffering. Of course, Job replies to God in submission and repentance after God puts him in his place (Job 42:1–6). But also, the story of Job displays Job's astonishing attitude toward God in the face of immense suffering. Job 1:21 contains Job's famous saying that God gives and takes away and tells of Job praising God despite what had happened to his family. This amazing portion of the book of Job shows a more positive response to suffering. Yes, Job lost all his children in one day, and no parent wants to imagine something similar happening, but Job's words show that he was grateful to God for the time he had with his children. Job's faith in God allowed him to be thankful to God when most humans would be paralyzed with grief. Moreover, while Job's friends attempted to speak *about* God, providing theodicies and cold explanations for Job's suffering, Job spoke *to* God and continued to seek relationship with God in spite of his suffering ([Burrell 2008](#), p. 67). Thus, what looks like another story showing that suffering is intrinsically irredeemable, turns out to be an instructive and emotionally satisfying example of lived and reconciled suffering. Many more biblical stories can enhance theodicy in similar ways, but hopefully, this quick discussion of Job has shown the great advantages narrative can have for theodicy.

While individual stories have great rhetorical promise, even greater is the metanarrative of the entire Bible, so it will be good now to turn to the Christian tradition of using the drama of the divine economy in theodicy. Using biblical narrative in theodicy is no new approach when considering the history of the Christian Church. The early Church Fathers are known not only for their philosophical prowess in providing explanations for God's allowance of evil, but also for their use of Scripture to provide a comprehensive and satisfying theodicy. Inspired by many stories in the Bible, especially the story of creation, they used the best philosophy of their time to explain how God is not the author of evil and how God is capable of and plans on drawing good from the evil He allows (see [Gavrilyuk 2016](#), pp. 1–6). But also, they used the metanarrative of salvation history in the Bible to situate human suffering in its biblical context. Patristic scholar Pavel Gavrilyuk discusses the patristic use of salvation history when he says,

The narrative framework of salvation history offered the fathers more than just an explanation of evil's origin. Human history was presented as a series of God's redemptive acts, the climax of which was the divine incarnation. Incarnation was seen as a new creation, as God's restoration of his image and likeness in human beings, as the God-Man's victory over the powers of sin, corruption, death, and the sphere of the demonic. The fruits of this victory, abundantly available in the sacramental life of the church, would be most fully manifest in the eschaton. The hope for the resurrection of the dead and the orientation of life toward the final judgment expanded the horizon for a bigger-picture theodicy. (Gavrilyuk 2016, p. 6)

So, while using individual biblical stories has its uses, the grand metanarrative of Scripture can provide a "bigger-picture" theodicy that explains the origins of human suffering and how all suffering will eventually come to an end.

Much could be said about using the divine economy in theodicy, but here, it will be good to discuss a few benefits and a way the economy can be joined with Monroe's Motivated Sequence to hopefully rouse listeners to action. First, the divine economy can help place the origin and continuation of evil in the context of the biblical story. The story of creation is foundational to the divine economy, and a discussion of the metanarrative of Scripture always begins with a discussion of the Fall.

The story in Genesis 1–3 has many beneficial aspects for theodicy. The story of Adam and Eve's first sins can provide an example of the free will theodicy that is often utilized by contemporary theists. God created human beings to know and to love Him, but love and trust are not possible without free will, so God endowed humans with free will and allowed them to make freely willed choices. Everyone wants to live in a world without sin, but humans are made in the image of God, endowed with free will and dignity, so God does not force their choices, and He allows them to make decisions whether for good or bad.

In addition to the story serving as an example of the free will theodicy, it can also bring out some second-personal knowledge of the reality of the human condition and help place emphasis on human choices as the true origin of evil. The narrative of the Fall shows how the human heart often is not satisfied, even when things are going well. Adam and Eve were given dominion over the earth, yet they were not satisfied with what they were given and wanted to determine right and wrong for themselves, even to the point of disobeying God's one command (see Wenham 1987, pp. 118–19; Hamilton 1990, p. 140; Mathews 1996, p. 205; Waltke 2001, p. 87). It is a challenging task to wrestle with the story of the Fall, imagining what one might do in the same situation, but either way, the story brings to the imagination the reality that humans can be unhappy even if things are going well, and human choices are the major cause of suffering in this world, yet somehow God is the one most people blame.

Like the story of Job, there are more positive aspects to the story as well. One major takeaway from the Fall story is that it shows God's love and grace. When discussing the problem of evil, the conversation is often extremely negative, as the only things discussed are various evils and possible reasons for God allowing them. But Genesis 1–3 emphasizes God's love as God is shown creating an entire universe and world simply to create humans to know and love Him. Also, God's grace is shown when He does not destroy Adam and Eve for sinning against Him despite the penalty of death mentioned earlier (see Wenham 1987, p. 145; Hamilton 1990, pp. 143–45; Waltke 2001, p. 87).

God's grace is a neglected aspect of the biblical story, especially when discussing the problem of evil. It is often asked why God would create humanity, knowing that Adam and Eve would sin and that human history would unfold as it did. The idea is that an

all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God would never do such a thing. But this is only reasonable when forgetting God's justice and grace. Would a God who is merely omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent create a world with so much moral evil? Perhaps not. However, the answer to this question is even harder when changing the question to include God's attributes of grace and patience.

Accordingly, Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, used the biblical metanarrative to emphasize that Jesus' death on the cross was not a surprise to God (see [Steenberg 2008](#); [Behr 2013](#), pp. 121–204). Instead, the unfolding of human history was planned by God from all eternity as the means to display His grace, mercy, and love in the sacrificial giving of His only Son, Jesus Christ. For example, Irenaeus explains,

God, therefore, is one and the same, who rolls up the heaven as a book, and renews the face of the earth; who made the things of time for man, so that coming to maturity in them, he may produce the fruit of immortality; and who, through His kindness, also bestows [upon him] eternal things, "that in the ages to come He may show the exceeding riches of His grace;" who was announced by the law and the prophets, whom Christ confessed as His Father. ([Irenaeus 1885](#), *Adversus haereses*, 4.5.1)

God's allowance of the Fall was included in His plan to ultimately produce immortality in a mature humanity. God, knowing that humans would not accept His invitation to learn about His ways in His presence in the Garden of Eden, planned the history of humanity to lead up to His ultimate show of love and grace when He took on human flesh and accepted the punishment that His justice demands.

Through all this, God's grace is magnified. While it is common for God's grace to be left out of discussions of God's allowance of evil, God's grace has game-changing implications for theodicy. Atheists argue that God ought to eliminate all evil, but the stories of Adam and Eve and ultimately Jesus Christ show that all humans today should be infinitely thankful for God's allowance of evil. Since Adam and Eve are the progenitors of all humans, no living person would be alive today if it were not for the grace God showed Adam and Eve when they first sinned. Likewise, if God were to eliminate all evil today, as atheists require, this would involve God eliminating all humanity because all humans have sinned and deserve condemnation. So, humans should be thankful for God's grace and realize that Jesus' death on the cross, the pinnacle of human history, showed God's love and mercy all the more while providing the opportunity for the redemption of all humanity.

As Irenaeus mentions, God's divine economy of salvation ultimately culminates in God putting an end to all evil and providing redeemed humanity eternal life in His presence forever. This eschatological aspect of the divine economy is where the biblical metanarrative can merge with Monroe's Motivated Sequence. As mentioned, the sequence includes five steps: attention, need, satisfaction, visualization, and action. The drama of the divine economy not only provides the first four steps in the sequence, but it also provides an opportunity for the last step.

In the context of the problem of evil, the major issue is that there is so much suffering in the world. As shown, the drama of the divine economy explains why there is so much suffering (attention) because Adam and Eve sinned, resulting in all of humanity being separated from God and humanity becoming inclined to sin. Since the Fall, all humans long to be free of suffering and guilt and to live in a world where others do not suffer as well (need). The solution to the problem is the good news of Jesus Christ (satisfaction). All people need to do is accept the saving work of Jesus Christ (action), and in return, they are promised the Holy Spirit, the down payment of eternal life to come. If all would accept Jesus and do their best to follow His commands, life on earth would be greatly improved on a personal level with more joy, love, and hope, along with decreased physical

and emotional suffering at the societal level as people attempted to love their neighbors as themselves (visualization). God's laws provide tangible examples of what human behavior would be like if it were lined up with God's will, but also, the book of Revelation provides an illustration of what the world will be like when there is no sin or death (visualization). So, including narrative in theodicy might not only make it more effective, but it also could provide an opportunity for evangelism, providing audiences with a tangible end goal to allow them to be a part of the solution to evil and not part of the problem.

6. Conclusions

Hopefully, it has been shown why contemporary, theistic philosophers of religion ought to reconsider the idea that theodicy is the realm of logical argumentation alone. Ignoring the rhetorical aspect of the problem of evil not only opens the door for the objections of anti-theodacists, but it also unnecessarily handicaps theodacists because it fails to utilize every aspect of compelling speaking and writing available.

Anti-theodacists insist that theodicy is morally problematic because it is too abstract and callous, ignoring the reality of experienced suffering and offering no pragmatic benefits for the emotions and the person who has personally undergone suffering. However, if theists will include biblical narrative in theodicy, they can address the concerns of anti-theodacists without abandoning the practice of theodicy. As Campbell emphasized, appealing to the imagination and emotions is a major step to persuading audiences who need more than mere logical argumentation and who need their negative feelings redirected to the right place.

Indeed, Campbell's notion of rhetoric is both practical and has stood the test of time in many ways. Campbell's ideas concerning appeals to the imagination and emotions have been confirmed through contemporary science and undergone development in contemporary philosophy. Appealing to the imagination not only aids in creating vivid and easily understandable examples, but it also can provide a way to communicate knowledge that would be impossible to explain with dialectic alone. Including narrative in the debate over the problem of evil can supplement abstract theodicies with tangible stories that help readers identify with and feel empathy for biblical characters, ultimately providing "good reasons" for readers to retain or find faith in God.

So, it is clear that rhetoric is beneficial for theodicy, and, arguably, the best way to appeal to the imaginations and emotions of listeners is to include biblical stories as well as the metanarrative of the Bible. Many biblical stories easily supplement various theodicies and provide the above-mentioned advantages for theodicy overall. Ultimately, if theists want to open the door to evangelism, they can take Campbell's concepts further and attempt to integrate the metanarrative of Scripture with Monroe's Motivated Sequence.

Moreover, anti-theodacists provide pessimistic stories of suffering, but their conclusions that suffering is irredeemable and irreconcilable could be viewed as callous and morally problematic; some people might agree with anti-theodacists that there can be no meaning to suffering, but many people are searching for answers. So, perhaps a step toward reconciliation here is for both theists and anti-theodacists to consider that biblical narratives provide tangible examples of reconcilable suffering and "good reasons" for faith in God, and all this apart from the use of abstract theodicies. Theists can address the perceived callousness of theodicies by including biblical narratives, and anti-theodacists can consider how their narratives compare with biblical narratives.

Ultimately, the metanarrative of Scripture provides objective meaning to suffering in this world. A world without God is a world in which human life is a cosmic accident, devoid of meaning and purpose. A world where suffering has no higher purpose is a sad and meaningless world indeed. Theists need to include rhetoric and biblical narrative in

their explanations for God's allowance of evil to enhance theodicy and to provide humanity with the answers and the meaning it so desperately needs. Rhetorical responses to the problem of evil are more compelling and appeal to the entire person, not just the mind.

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