

REVELATION AND THE VERIDICALITY OF NARRATIVES

ELEONORE STUMP
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

Abstract. On Christian doctrine, God is love; and the love of God is most manifest in Christ's passion. The passion of Christ thus matters to philosophical theology's examination of the divine attribute of love. But the passion of Christ is presented in a biblical story, and there are serious methodological questions about the way in which a biblical story can be used as evidence in philosophical theology. And these questions in turn raise deeper epistemological questions. How does any narrative transmit knowledge? And what counts as veridicality in a narrative? This paper deals with some of the questions for philosophical theology and then concentrates on the more general epistemological questions about narratively transmitted knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophical theology is the attempt to use philosophical tools to investigate theological claims made by a particular religion, especially those claims put forward by that religion as revealed by the deity. Philosophical theology tests the coherence of such doctrinal claims, attempts explanations of them, uncovers their logical connections with other doctrinal propositions, and so on.

In this respect, philosophical theology is like philosophy of physics or philosophy of biology. The aim of philosophy of biology, for example, is not to do biology but to philosophize about the claims that biology takes to be true. For philosophy of biology, it does not matter if the biological claims are in fact true, provided that they are taken to be true in biology. Analogously, it does not matter for philosophical theology if the data drawn from theology are true. Of course, it matters to me as a person, as it matters to believers and atheists alike, whether theological claims are true. (In the same sense, as the current pandemic shows, it matters to me as a person and to everybody whether claims taken to be true in the community of biologists really are true.) But for purposes of philosophical theology, what matters is whether the claims in question are orthodox, that is, whether they are accepted as true and mandatory for belief within a particular religious community.¹ Nothing in the project of philosophical theology requires that the theological claims accepted as orthodox, that is, as the starting points to be used as data, are true or historically accurate. (On the other hand, of course, nothing rules out supposing that they are true and historically accurate either. Analogously, a project in philosophy of biology does not require that the biological claims at issue be true, but it does not rule out their truth either.)

Some of what is orthodox for a religious community is given by stories, especially stories accepted by that community as part of divine revelation. In other work, I showed that there is a kind of knowledge that is not propositional but that nonetheless is knowledge.² It is a knowledge of persons. I argued both that such knowledge can be acquired in second-person experience of other persons and that it can be

1 It is, of course, not always easy to specify with precision what to count as orthodox in theology; but, for the project of philosophical theology, there has to be at least some rough characterization of the theologically orthodox. For my purposes, I will take as orthodox, that is, as the data to be assumed for this enterprise in philosophical theology, the claims of the creeds and early ecumenical councils and also those theological claims generally accepted as true and central to the faith by the broad majority of authoritative thinkers in the history of the Christian tradition. For a more detailed discussion of the nature of orthodoxy and its correlative notion of heresy, see Eleonore Stump, "Orthodoxy and Heresy", *Faith and Philosophy*, no. 16 (1999).

2 Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), Chapter 4.

transmitted through stories.³ But if stories transmit knowledge, then what they transmit must be true, at least in some sense of ‘true’. The question therefore arises: what is knowledge and what is truth with regard to a story?⁴ In addition to that general question which is not peculiar to the project of philosophical theology, there is an associated but more complicated question that arises with regard to some stories that are data for philosophical theology. That is because some stories conveying what a religious community takes to be true are supposed by that community to be divinely revealed. But what is truth with regard to a story when the story is taken to be part of divine revelation? That is, what difference does it make to the apprehension of truth in a story and the knowledge transmitted by the story if the story is supposed to be somehow communicated by God?

Some answers to these questions are needed if philosophical theology is to include among the data it takes as starting points narratives accepted as divinely revealed. In this essay, I will explore these questions and attempt some preliminary answers.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND TRUTH IN NARRATIVES

A narrative could transmit truth in virtue of consisting only in sentences that convey true propositions. When a police investigator asks a witness to a crime to tell him what happened, the investigator is hoping for a story of this sort. But, of course, this is not the only way a narrative can transmit knowledge. A narrative that is entirely fictional and meant to be taken as fictional can also transmit knowledge, but it will not do so in virtue of consisting in only true historical propositions. Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* is as powerful as it is because of the painful knowledge it conveys, but it is a fictional narrative; it does not convey the knowledge it transmits by means of containing only true propositions.

In other work, I have argued that even fictional narratives can transmit a non-propositional knowledge of persons.⁵ And the more excellent a fictional narrative, the deeper and more insightful the knowledge of persons it can convey. People who complain about cheap mystery stories or shallow romance novels are not annoyed by the stories’ inclusion of false propositions. They are reacting rather to the stories’ failure with regard to the knowledge of persons. The stories lack what we might call ‘veridicality’ with regard to the people it depicts. Conversely, when a novel is successful as a story, the novel’s success will be at least in part due to veridicality so understood.

Whatever one’s view of truth in propositions is, one might think of a story’s veridicality roughly as the story’s corresponding to the way persons are—their characters, interactions, sorrows, joys, and all the other things in human lives.⁶ And although the truth of a proposition is an all-or-nothing sort of thing, if we think of the truth conveyed by narrative knowledge of persons as veridicality, then we can think of the truth of a story as coming in degrees. Even if a work of fiction does not consist entirely or at all in true historical propositions, the story may nonetheless yield knowledge because it contains a greater or lesser veridical portrait of the way the world is in virtue of illuminating in story form the nature of persons, their interactions, their adaptive or maladaptive responses to crises, their thriving even in their

3 There is a large literature attempting to explain the kind of cognition transmitted by fiction. For an example of current philosophical discussion of knowledge and narrative, see Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010) and Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2020), and Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

4 This question invites the further question: what is a story? But for my purposes here I will simply take for granted that although there will certainly be boundary cases, most things that count as stories will be readily recognized by most people as stories.

5 See Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, Chapters 2–4.

6 I am not claiming that this is the only kind of knowledge narratives can convey. A story could convey knowledge about beasts that is at least analogous to knowledge of persons. But it could also simply represent possible futures or possible scenarios, as science fiction stories tend to do. For discussion of this kind of knowledge transmitted by stories, see Helen de Cruz and Johan de Smedt, “Emotional Responses to Fiction: An Evolutionary Perspective”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Evolution and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Joyce (Routledge, 2018). I am grateful to Helen de Cruz for calling this point and this paper to my attention.

afflictions, and so on. On this way of thinking about the knowledge conveyed by a work of fiction, a story is veridical in virtue of imparting some greater or lesser general insight into persons.

A historical novel, for example, will typically contain depictions of historical events that are created by the novelist. But if the novel is good, those creative depictions will succeed in communicating to the novel's audience a veridical picture of the historical episode in question. When a historical novel is not good, it is not (or not just) because it includes fictional depictions of historical events; rather, it is because its fictional elements are unfaithful in a different manner to the way the world was then. An invented speech put in the mouth of a real historical person, for example, might strike the novel's readers as out of character for the historical person in question; and then readers will react with annoyance or disgust, because the novelist failed to be true to the character of that person. What is defective in such a case is not knowledge of the facts about that person. Rather, what is flawed is knowledge of that person.

Even historical biographies that mean to exclude all fictional elements can be evaluated in this way. There are numerous biographies of Oliver Cromwell, for example; and no doubt the major ones all consist exclusively (or at least largely) of true propositions about Cromwell and his times. But Antonia Fraser's biography stands out among the rest of them, because her depiction of Cromwell brings him to life, as we say. Unlike some other biographies of Cromwell, including some written by outstanding scholars of the period, her biography is not a wooden assemblage of data about Cromwell and his times. Rather, she succeeds in telling the story of Cromwell's life in such a way that from her biography readers can come to know Cromwell, and not just facts about Cromwell.

The point at issue here can be illustrated and explained further by a consideration of the two major early biographical accounts of the life of Francis of Assisi.

The first Life of Francis was written by Thomas of Celano in 1229 at the request of Pope Gregory IX. The translators of this life say about it,

As the first written account of the life of Saint Francis, Thomas's work holds a place of honor. It holds a unique place in the historical sequence of the many other lives which would subsequently be written. This is not to argue that this text is more historical in the contemporary sense of that concept. More importantly, The Life of Saint Francis captures the first burst of enthusiasm in the new religious movement of the Lesser Brothers.⁷

Although there are canonical and hagiographical aspects to the text of The Life of Saint Francis [by Thomas], these are not the only dimensions or perspectives from which Thomas writes. He includes specific biographical and historical data. In these specifics about Francis and his early followers, Thomas appeals to his own experience of Francis and... to 'trustworthy witnesses'.⁸

And the translators conclude by saying,

The official canonical purposes and hagiographical elements Thomas utilized to construct his text do not lessen the value of The Life of Saint Francis as a primary source for historical elements of Francis's life...⁹

Here the translators are attempting to explain and defend the idea that although the Life written by Thomas of Celano contains many false propositions and fictional stories about Francis, nonetheless the Life succeeds in being a historically veridical portrait of Francis and the events of his life.

Yet another early Life of Francis was written some time later by Bonaventure. The background to the composition of this Life includes the history of contention in the Franciscan order. Shortly after the death of Francis, the order he founded was divided between the so-called "Spirituals" and the moderates over the issue of poverty for the Franciscans. The Spirituals thought of Francis as instituting a strict practice of poverty, and they took themselves to be the true disciples of Francis. The moderate faction insisted, however, that they were the true followers of Francis, although their interpretation of the order's commitment to poverty was less strenuous. In 1257, Pope Alexander IV required John of Parma, then minister general

7 Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. W. Hellmann, and William Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 173.

8 Armstrong, Hellmann, and Short, *Francis of Assisi*, 175.

9 Ibid., 176.

of the order, to resign because of his partisan upholding of the Spirituals. Bonaventure, a representative of the moderates, was chosen to succeed him. And shortly afterwards, in 1260, the Chapter of Narbonne commissioned Bonaventure to write what in their view should be the official life of Francis.

Although it is a matter of dispute among historians exactly why Bonaventure was asked to write this life, it is clear that the depiction of Francis in an account of his life would have weight in the battle between the two disputing factions of the Franciscan order. The fact that Bonaventure was asked to write a Life of Francis so soon after his accession to the governance of the Order suggests that his Life was meant to cast Francis in a different light from the depiction of Francis in the Life by Thomas of Celano. In fact, much of Bonaventure's Life is taken from the Life by Thomas of Celano,¹⁰ but Bonaventure recast much of that earlier material to a greater or lesser degree.

It is worth adding here that at the General Chapter at Paris in 1266, a decree was passed directing the friars to destroy any earlier Life of Francis, so that only Bonaventure's Life might remain. The translator of Bonaventure's Life comments that "there are more than four hundred surviving manuscripts of Bonaventure's work, but only twenty of the ... life of Celano."¹¹ And the translator adds,

A number of ... historians have been critical of Bonaventure's biography, viewing it as a purely political tool to ... soften the message of Francis.¹²

But the translator defends his decision to include the Life written by Bonaventure in an anthology of the major works of Bonaventure this way:

Once [Bonaventure's Life] is examined within the context of spirituality, its depth, power and wisdom become clear. An analysis of the biography reveals that it is a remarkable spiritual work which penetrates deeply into the spirituality of Francis.... Without this biography, one of the most important and influential traditions of interpreting Francis's spirituality would be left ignored.¹³

On the view of the translator of Bonaventure's Life, then, this Life gives important historical insight into Francis and the events of his life even if it was written for a tendentious purpose as part of a political move against the group of Franciscans represented by the Life composed by Thomas of Celano. Even with many false propositions and fictional stories about Francis, this Life is also veridical; it is true to Francis, as one might say.

Now consider a story in each Life that, in the view of scholars, is meant to be reporting the same episode in the life of Francis. Here is how Bonaventure tells that story.

Once when [Francis] was to preach in the presence of the pope and cardinals at the suggestion of the lord cardinal of Ostia, he memorized a sermon which he had carefully composed. When he stood in their midst to present his edifying words, he went completely blank and was unable to say anything at all. This he admitted to them in true humility and directed himself to invoke the grace of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly he began to overflow with such effective eloquence and to move the minds of those high-ranking men to compunction with such force and power that it was clearly evident it was not he, but the Spirit of the Lord who was speaking.¹⁴

And here is how Thomas of Celano tells the story.

Once he came to the city of Rome on a matter concerning the Order, and he greatly yearned to speak before the Lord Pope Honorius and the venerable cardinals. Lord Hugo, the renowned bishop of Ostia, venerated the holy man of God with special affection. When he learned of his arrival, Lord Hugo was filled with fear and joy, admiring the holy man's fervor yet aware of his simple purity. Trusting to the mercy of the Almighty that never fails the faithful in time of need, he led the holy man before the Lord Pope and the venerable cardinals.

¹⁰ In addition to the earlier Life by Thomas of Celano, there is also a brief account of the life of Francis by Julian of Speyer; and parts of it are also incorporated into Bonaventure's Life.

¹¹ Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God: the Tree of Life, the Life of Francis* (Paulist Press, 1978), 41.

¹² Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 297–98.

As he stood in the presence of so many princes of the Church, blessed Francis, after receiving permission and a blessing, fearlessly began to speak.

He was speaking with such fire of spirit that he could not contain himself for joy. As he brought forth the word from his mouth, he moved his feet as if dancing, not playfully but burning with the fire of divine love, not provoking laughter but moving them to tears of sorrow. For many of them were touched in their hearts, amazed at the grace of God and the great determination of the man.¹⁵

For the sake of argument, accept that in the differing versions of this story in each Life some sentences are not true. Suppose, for example, that Francis had not actually memorized a speech and then forgotten it entirely, as Bonaventure says. Or suppose that Francis had not actually been dancing before the Pope and cardinals, as Thomas of Celano says. Additionally, suppose that even those sentences that are true are still somehow slanted to show Francis in what the writer of the Life takes to be a good light. Suppose, that is, that the tears of sorrow mentioned by Thomas of Celano did not consist of real weeping, as the story by Thomas might lead us to suppose, but was more nearly a matter of a stray tear trickling down the cheek of a limited number of those present. Or suppose that the effective eloquence mentioned by Bonaventure was not a matter of such moving rhetoric that only a miracle could explain it, but was more nearly just a homily that touched those few people then present.

Even with all these suppositions, what is notable is that from the combination of the two differing stories of what is apparently the same episode, the character of Francis begins to emerge. Even on the supposition that there are false sentences and tendentious slants in each story, the combination of the two stories converges on one picture of Francis; and it is a veridical one, as virtually all historians would agree.

And now consider two stories which evidently have the same aim as regards the characterization of Francis but which are so different as to make it obvious that they are not relating the same episode. Both stories intend to show the special relationship Francis had to beasts, and in both stories the beasts in question are sheep. Here is the first story in the Life by Thomas of Celano:

Once [Francis] was traveling through the Marches And he came across a man on his way to market. The man was carrying over his shoulder two little lambs bound and ready for sale. When blessed Francis heard the bleating lambs, his innermost heart was touched and, drawing near, he touched them as a mother does with a crying child, showing his compassion. 'Why are you torturing my brother lambs,' he said to the man, 'binding them and hanging them this way?' 'I am carrying them to market to sell them, since I need the money,' he replied. The holy man asked: 'What will happen to them?' 'Those who buy them will kill them and eat them,' he responded. At that, the holy man said: 'No, this must not happen! Here, take my cloak as payment and give me the lambs.' The man readily gave him the little lambs and took the cloak since it was much more valuable. The cloak was one the holy man had borrowed from a friend on the same day to keep out the cold. The holy man of God, having taken the lambs, now was wondering what he should do with them. Asking for advice from the brother who was with him, he gave [the lambs] back to that man, ordering him never to sell them or allow any harm to come to them, but instead to preserve, nourish, and guide them carefully.¹⁶

Bonaventure's Life also has several stories about Francis and sheep. None of them is a match for the story about the lambs in the Life by Thomas of Celano, but here is one story typical of those that Bonaventure tells about Francis and sheep.

Another time at St. Mary of the Portiuncula the man of God was offered a sheep, which he gratefully accepted in his love of that innocence and simplicity which the sheep by its nature reflects. The pious man admonished the little sheep to praise God attentively and to avoid giving any offense to the friars. The sheep carefully observed his instructions, as if it recognized the piety of the man of God. For when it heard the friars chanting in choir, it would enter the church, genuflect without instructions from anyone, and bleat before the altar of the Virgin, the mother of the Lamb, as if it wished to greet her. Besides, when the most sacred body of Christ was elevated at mass, it would bow down on bended knees as if this reverent animal were reproaching those who were not devout and inviting the devout to reverence the sacrament.¹⁷

15 Armstrong, Hellmann, and Short, *Francis of Assisi*, 245.

16 Armstrong, Hellmann, and Short, *Francis of Assisi*, 249–50.

17 Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 256.

I do not want to insist that this story about Francis and a sheep in Bonaventure's *Life* is false. After all, there are strange tales told about animals, and this story could be true without any violation of the laws of nature. But, for the sake of argument, suppose what seems reasonable enough, namely, that the story is a complete fabrication from beginning to end. Clearly, the story about Francis and a sheep in the *Life* by Thomas of Celano might well also be entirely fictional, not because it strains credulity about the reported behavior of a beast but because its representation of Francis is so manifestly hagiographical.

So, for the sake of argument, suppose that each story about Francis and a sheep is entirely fictional. What is nevertheless notable about these apparently fictional stories in the two competing lives of Francis is that each of them seems true to Francis too. For that matter, these two apparently fictional stories work harmoniously with the other two stories given above that seem likely to be largely if not entirely historically true. All four of these stories can be taken together to sketch the lineaments of a portrait of Francis that seems true to life, given all the other things we know about Francis.

And now the question arises: How can tendentiously slanted narratives with false or inaccurate claims and completely fictional stories be woven into one whole meta-narrative that gives us knowledge of Francis?

This question would no doubt need an extended treatment to find a fully adequate answer to it. But in this paper I want just to gesture in the direction of such an answer.

As I explained above, the knowledge suited to be transmitted by narrative is the knowledge of persons. But for knowledge of a person, it might not be so much as helpful to get some of the facts about that person straight. Suppose, that is, that in the *Life* by Thomas of Celano the story about Francis and the two lambs is a fictional redrawing of an actual historical episode in the life of Francis because in the actual historical episode the beasts in question were some baby animals other than lambs. The face of Francis, if one can speak this way, would be represented in the same way by this story whether or not lambs were the beasts who were the object of his care. And something similar can be said about some of the other details in each of the stories above. If the Pope had not been present when Francis danced while preaching to the cardinals, the story would still acquaint us with Francis.

But, someone might suppose, if every detail in the stories is false, as is probably the case with the story about the sheep that Bonaventure tells, how then could the story possibly acquaint anyone with Francis? The answer, I think, is that even a wholly fictional story can transmit the knowledge of a person if the storyteller or his source has knowledge of that person. In the case of the story about the sheep in Bonaventure's *Life*, the storyteller — Bonaventure or his source for the story — is someone who was directly (or indirectly) familiar with the mind and heart of Francis and wanted to share his knowledge of Francis with others. If a storyteller is someone who knows directly or indirectly the person about whom the story is, then the storyteller might be able to transmit his knowledge of that person to others even with a fictional narrative that is entirely his own construction. In such a case, his story would work in the way fictional narratives typically do, except that the story about the person would be intended to present a particular historical person faithfully, instead of simply giving general knowledge of the nature and interactions of human persons as a novel can do.

Here we might also pause to reflect on what the opposite of a veridical story would be. If a veridical narrative transmits knowledge about persons, then the opposite of a veridical narrative would be a story that is unfaithful to the way persons are, actual historical persons, as in the case of Francis, or persons in general, in the case of entirely fictional stories. If an unfaithful story is meant to be fiction and not history, then the story's unfaithfulness cannot be explained as a matter of its having false propositions. Still, a story could fail to be faithful to the way things are in virtue of having contradictions in the narrative facts it reports. Cheap mystery stories sometimes fail in this way. The writer forgets that earlier in the story the victim had warm brown eyes and so describes her later as having ice-blue eyes. But more serious defects in a story can arise because the story contains what we might call 'character contradictions'.

Contradictions of this sort can arise in different ways. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Gollum's story of his finding the ring of power strikes those who hear it as non-veridical because the picture that story paints of Gollum seems contradicted by the character of Gollum as they know it. A narrative can contain

character contradictions because the same character is presented in contradictory ways within the same story; but it can also be part of the art of a narrative subsequently to reveal a previously hidden part of the story that explains away the appearance of character contradictions. For example, in George Eliot's great novel *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Casaubon finds her beloved Will Ladislaw in a compromising embrace with the wife of one of his friends, and the evidence then available to Dorothea strongly suggests that Ladislaw's behavior is treacherous, so that he seems not to be the man Dorothea (and the reader) thought he was. But it is part of the art of this novel that there is an explanation of his conduct which makes it consistent with his character as a good man, though it is a complicated explanation hidden from Dorothea for some time. The fact that Eliot felt she had to find such an explanation for Ladislaw's conduct helps make the point at issue here. If Eliot's novel had simply presented Ladislaw as the man of true integrity and deep commitment to Dorothea and had then shown him seducing the beautiful wife of his friend, the story would have struck its readers as defective, as false to the way persons are.

Of course, human beings can change in character or just act out of character, but good novelists generally find a way to explain such behavior to make those changes or those lapses of character consistent with the life history of the character in question. The depiction of Bulstrode in Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a good example. Bulstrode is a pillar of religious devotion in his community at the outset of the novel, but he eventually deliberately brings about the death of a sick man in his charge. The townspeople are shocked and dismayed (or shocked and maliciously gratified) when they learn what Bulstrode has done. But Eliot shows the reader that the explanation for Bulstrode's shocking conduct has its origins in Bulstrode's compromises with conscience already in his youth. The reader can eventually see that what seems to be Bulstrode's acting entirely out of character makes sense in the context of Bulstrode's whole life. Without this artistry of Eliot's, Bulstrode's story would not seem as veridical as it does to most readers. It would seem instead unfaithful to the way things are, as we commonly know and expect them to be. The defect of the story would lie in its failure to represent faithfully the way people are.

For these reasons, the translators of the *Lives by Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure* need not have been defensive about including obviously hagiographical material as informative about Francis. Obviously hagiographical stories can be veridical, too. What grounds the veridicality of the story about Francis and the two lambs is the knowledge of Francis that the storyteller or his source had and that the storyteller succeeded in transmitting through the hagiographical story. And one warrant for the veridicality of the story is the reaction of those among its audience who are acquainted with Francis as a result of their having come to know Francis from many such stories. The story about Francis and the lambs will strike them as true to Francis, not just because it shows the compassion Francis had for animals, but because it depicts the endearingly goofy character of his compassion — which is just like Francis, as those familiar with Francis through many stories will know.¹⁸

And here there is one more important thing to note about the veridicality of narratives.

We might think of the issue here on analogy with attempted resolutions of the problem of evil. Those who offer a theodicy are trying to show the compatibility of the existence of evil with the existence of a perfectly good, omniscient, omnipotent God by explaining what God's actual reasons for allowing evil are. Clearly, there can be only one successful theodicy (if there is any at all). But, as the extensive discussion of the problem of evil has made clear by now, a theodicy is not necessary for showing the compatibility of God and evil. A defense against the argument from evil is sufficient. A defense does not attempt to explain what God's actual reasons for allowing evil are. Rather, a defense gives one set of morally sufficient reasons that God might have for permitting evil. It does so by delineating one possible world, reasonably like the actual world, in which God and evil are compatible. But to be successful, a defense does not need to claim that this possible world is the only one in which God and evil co-exist; and, in fact, it is clear that more than one kind of reasonable defense could be offered. Furthermore, varying defenses might in fact be incompatible; and yet, nonetheless, the combination of the varying incompatible

18 I am grateful to Godehard Bruentrup and John Foley for helpful comments on an earlier attempt to explain these points.

but still reasonable defenses could illuminate something about the relation between God and evil in the actual world.

In this respect, a defense against the argument from evil is like an interpretation of a scientific theory, as such interpretations have come to be widely understood. In personal communication, Bas van Fraassen has characterized interpretations of scientific theories this way:

an interpretation tells a story which answers a ‘could’ question: How could the world possibly be for this theory to be true?, and every working interpretation increases our understanding of the theory.¹⁹

On this view of interpretations of a scientific theory, there could be equally valuable incompatible alternative interpretations of a theory. What makes them equally valuable is that, like a defense against the argument from evil, each valuable interpretation of a scientific theory, in effect, produces a defense of the theory, that is, a delineation of a possible world in which the theory is true. The combination of the varying but valuable interpretations helps to clarify the nature of the reality that the scientific theory is an attempt to elucidate. As van Fraassen puts the point,

more versions [that is, more interpretations of a scientific theory] bring more insight — not contradictions to be resolved, but different perspectives to be appreciated.²⁰

Composite meta-narratives share this characteristic of interpretations of scientific theories. We could combine all the different Lives of Francis into a large meta-narrative in differing ways. And each such meta-narrative could be considered as an interpretation, not of a theory, but rather of a person. Each such composite story would delineate a world of Francis, one might say. As I showed above with regard to the combination of the Lives of Francis by Bonaventure and Thomas of Celano, the composite of the differing Lives brings more insight into Francis than one Life alone would do. But we can combine them in different ways. For a meta-narrative to transmit knowledge about Francis, it is not necessary to insist that only one meta-narrative of Francis constitutes the true account of the life of Francis. Rather, there might be varying but valuable meta-narratives of the life of Francis that add to our understanding of Francis, on analogy with the varying interpretations of a scientific theory, on Van Fraassen’s view.

In making these claims about meta-narratives of the life of Francis, I am not rejecting the claim that there is one true account of the events of the life of Francis. Without doubt, there is one real and complete history of the life of Francis; and that one true account gives the sum of the facts about Francis.

But, as everyone understands, it is possible to have facts about a person and still not know the person. I do not mean that one could have facts about a person without being acquainted with the person. There is a knowledge of persons that is not identical to acquaintance with a person. One can come to know Oliver Cromwell from Antonia Fraser’s biography of him, for example, though of course one does not thereby become acquainted with him. So a true compilation of significant historical claims about a person, which is there to be given for every human being, is not the same as a story or a composite meta-story about a person that conveys knowledge of him. One could know, for example, that Francis had compassion for animals and that Francis traded an expensive cloak for two lambs, which he then returned to the farmer who had sold the lambs to Francis for the cloak. But the actual story about Francis and the lambs conveys Francis as those facts alone do not.

As the example of the Lives of Francis suggests, then, like interpretations of scientific theories, varying valuable composite meta-narratives can convey insight into a person without having to be resolved into the one and only one set of true facts about that person. It is therefore possible to have different meta-narratives that are incompatible with one another as regards some of the facts of their stories but that yet each constitute a faithful portrait of a person and so transmit knowledge of that person.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Bas van Fraassen for this illuminating way of thinking about interpretations of scientific theories and also for other very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. For a fuller exposition of his views on theories in philosophy of science and the relation of his views to philosophical theology, see, for example, Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (Yale Univ. Press, 2002).

²⁰ Personal communication.

CONCLUSION

So here is the implication of this brief examination of knowledge and truth conveyed by narratives for the use of biblical narratives in philosophical theology.

For philosophical theology it is not necessary to suppose that a biblical narrative presented as history is in fact historically accurate. The narrative might be historically accurate; but for the purposes of philosophical theology it need not be. To say so is not to express doubt about the truth or historical accuracy of the biblical narratives. Orthodox Christian doctrine has taken the biblical stories to be true and historically accurate; but philosophical theology does not need to pronounce on their historicity in order to make use of them for its philosophical investigation of theology.

Furthermore, differing interpretations of the same biblical texts may all be valuable. In fact, in the history of Christian biblical commentary, more than one exegesis of the same biblical story has sometimes been given by the same author. The most famous case is probably Augustine's commentary on Genesis. Presumably, Augustine supposed that there really is just one set of theological and historical events that constitute the story of the divine creation of the world. That is, there is just one true account, one true set of facts, about the events that were the coming into being of the created world. And yet, in commenting on the story of creation, Augustine gave one reading after another, proposing to the reader that there is something beneficial to be gained from each of the disparate readings. On Augustine's view, it is not necessary to choose among them. Commenting on his multiple expositions of the story in the first lines of Genesis, for example, Augustine said,

I have, to the best of my ability, winkled out and presented a great variety of possible meanings to the words of the book of Genesis ... I have avoided affirming anything hastily in a way that would rule out any alternative explanation that may be a better one, so leaving everyone free to choose whichever they can grasp most readily in their turn....²¹

The moral of the Lives of Francis is here on display.

So here is one significant methodological lesson of these reflections: philosophical theology is not itself a historical discipline. Its aim is not to uncover historical truths. Rather, its aim is to understand the claims, and the implications of the claims, taken to be orthodox by a particular religion. And, insofar as philosophical theology aims to elucidate orthodox doctrines about God, who is understood to be a person (in our sense of the word) with a mind and a will, then philosophical theology can avail itself of biblical narratives that are traditionally taken to transmit faithfully the knowledge of persons with regard to God without considering whether or not the narratives are historically accurate.

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