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**Narrative, Theology, and Philosophy of Religion**

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**50-150 word abstract**

In this entry, we survey key discussions on the role of narrative in theology and philosophy of religion. We begin with epistemological questions about whether and how narrative offers genuine understanding of reality. We explore how narrative intersects with the problems of evil and divine hiddenness. We discuss narrative’s role in theological reflection and practice in general, and in black and feminist theologies specifically. We close by briefly exploring the role of narrative in theorization about life’s meaning.

**Keywords**

Black Theology, Divine Hiddenness, Feminist Theology, God, Meaning of Life, Narrative, Narrative Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Problem of Evil, Story

**Introduction**

Stories accompany us nearly every step of the way through life. They inform and inspire us. They show us right from wrong and motivate us to action. They help us navigate the challenges of our common human predicament, and may even expand our understanding of ourselves, God, and the meaning of life.

Researchers across disciplines theorize about the role of narrative in human life. Some focus on the way in which our individual narratives underlie our “sense of self” (MacIntyre 1984). Others concentrate on the way in which we construct and maintain narratives: some emphasize the role of automatic, hardwired brain processes (Dennett 1992); others the ways in which we consciously, and often intentionally, narrativize our lives in order to make better sense of our experiences (Velleman 2003); and still others articulate the ways in which narratives serve as a universal kind of “metacode” which enables transmission of transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality (White 1980).

The past few decades have seen an increase in discipline-specific theorization on the nature and role of narrative in fields such as philosophy (Dennett 1992; Nussbaum 1990; Velleman 2003), theology (Frei 1974; Hauerwas & Jones 1997), andphilosophy of religion (Stump 2010). In what follows, we offer an overview of important discussions involving narrative in these fields.

**The Epistemology of Narrative**

The immense power of narrative to inform, inspire, and motivate us is undeniable. But do narratives provide reliable information about the nature of reality? Or, do they undermine and distort understanding? (Strawson 2004). Despite such skepticism, many maintain that narratives enable us to access genuine knowledge about God, ourselves, and the world. Some even claim that a narrative approach is *essential* for understanding and communicating certain kinds of knowledge, knowledge not fully accessible or communicable through a systematic or analytic modality (Nussbaum 1990; Stump 2010). Narrative and non-narrative approaches are relevantly different: the former evaluates narratives primarily on the basis of features like coherence, significance, and communicative power, whereas the latter evaluates narrative (and non-narrative) information against truth and accuracy-centered standards.

Notably missing thus far is a concise definition of what exactly a narrative *is*. Defining “narrative” is complicated, primarily because understandings of narrative vary widely. Such diversity notwithstanding, there are a few general features of narratives common across this wide array of views that allow for at least a minimalist definition: a narrative is a *diachronically-extended* story which presents a *sequential* account of events *unified* around a *character* or *set of characters*.

**The Problem of Evil and Narrative**

The problem of evil (see EOPR0137 and EOPR0136) presents substantial epistemic and practical obstacles to religious belief. Though in various forms these challenges extend to non-western and non-theistic religious traditions, we narrow our focus here to a Christian theistic perspective.

Eschatological (see EOPR0129) doctrines are crucial in some theistic defenses and theodicies, as we attempt to find meaning and hope amidst suffering. Narrative provides resources to illuminate possible connections between eschatology and the problem of evil. Some have argued that a narrative’s ending has a significant kind of proleptic power—in virtue of being the last word, the indelible final stance—that can change and then galvanize the way we view a narrative in its entirety (Velleman 2003). Endings can alter the significance of earlier narrative elements by providing a richer, settled perspective for how we think and feel about them. On theistic views, we experience this blessed, redeemed reality in the eschaton. Though this ending does not possess literary alchemical power to magically transform evil itself into good, the perspectival priority it provides may alter the significance of pre-end ills in our life stories. Pain, suffering, evil, and death speak neither loudest nor last on the theistic metanarrative. This new perspective that the end provides may be one that we can neither sufficiently understand nor appreciate until we experience it.

However, some challenge this understanding by pointing out that experiences of particularly horrific evils and trauma often seem to severely undermine the subject’s ability to construct and maintain her self-narrative, thereby diminishing the self-narrative’s potential for this kind of transformation (White & Epston 1990). If a subject’s self-narrative is central to her identity and experience as a self, such effects can be devastating – likely also undermining her ability to engage with God and the world. Self-narratives that have been so severely crippled by experiences of horrendous evil challenge defenses and theodicies (see EOPR0387) of the kinds mentioned above (Beste 2007).

Narratives also play an important role in engaging the problem of divine hiddenness – which is often considered a key dimension of the problem of evil. Some hold that biblical narratives, as well as God’s activity in individual self-narratives, can serve as means of “divine self-disclosure” (Rea 2009). Through these narrative vehicles, God mediates his presence and communicates elements of his character, thereby revealing himself and weakening the problem of divine hiddenness (Rea 2009; Stump 2010). Through our continued engagement with biblical narratives, and consequent transformation of our self-narratives, we may become more receptive to God’s presence and salvific work in our lives.

**Narrative Theology**

Narrative plays an important role in theology – Scripture (see EOPR 0052 and 0053) is full of narratives, and theology engages people’s personal self-narratives, as well as community-wide, shared narratives – and most theologians agree that narratives can serve powerful communicative purposes. However, Narrative Theology makes the stronger claim that narrative is *integral* to theology – both the form and content of theological claims ought to be profoundly shaped by, and grounded in, narratives (Hauerwas & Jones 1997). This narrative approach is deemed superior to more systematic or analytic approaches, although these approaches may still fruitfully interact.

Narrative Theology speaks to questions like: how are biblical narratives and the life of the believer, which are captured by her self-narrative, related? What role should the self-narrative and community-wide narratives of the believer play in the metanarrative of Christianity (see EOPR0070)? How should we evaluate these narratives? Two distinct Narrative Theology approaches emerge in “the Yale school” (Frei 1974; Hauerwas & Jones 1997; Lindbeck 1984), and “the Chicago school” (McFague 1982; Ricoeur 1994). Those aligned more closely with the Chicago school emphasize the allegorical nature of biblical narratives, and the importance of Jesus (EOPR0193) serving as an embodiment of more general human traits (for instance selflessness, righteousness). According to this school, the general templates found in biblical, and other Christian, narratives enable the subject to imagine and interpret current reality in alternative ways (Ricoeur 1994).

In contrast, those more closely aligned with the Yale school tend to think of biblical narratives more literally, and emphasize the importance of Jesus’ existence as a specific person. The overarching Scriptural narrative serves as a unique and authoritative standard in light of which we should understand, evaluate, and potentially revise Christian claims and beliefs. Because God tells his story through Scriptural narrative, the reader should approach it such that it “absorbs her world” – rather than searching isolated fragments of this narrative for answers to specific questions, thereby “absorbing” those fragments, so to speak, into her world (Frei 1974; Lindbeck 1984). Because the biblical narrative absorbs the believer’s world, it is understood through its concrete embodiment in, and transformation of, her individual and communal narratives.

Although many mainstream theologians utilize some kind of narrative approach, others argue that Narrative Theology risks misrepresenting God himself as a kind of narrative (Murphy 2007). And others, such as some Black and Feminist (see EOPR0150) theologians, approach mainstream Narrative Theology and Christian narratives critically, claiming they have often contributed to exclusion and oppression. Some reject a narrative approach, while others retain it and reclaim, subvert, or replace the oppressive narratives of mainstream Narrative Theology.

**Black Theology and Narrative**

James Cone, a founder of Black Theology explains that historically, “white theologians built logical systems, black folks told tales” (Cone 1970). Like other narrative theologies, Black Theology affirms the importance of both the narrative form and content in theology. Many Black Theologians see more value in engaging with individual and communal narratives of everyday life and concrete religious practices, often instead of engaging with more abstract, academic theological topics. Relatedly, they often emphasize Jesus’ life and actions as recounted through biblical narratives, over abstract propositions concerning his nature.

Many Black Theologians maintain that dominant (primarily white) culture has, *sometimes* unintentionally and unwittingly, corrupted and interpreted Christianity and its narratives to serve their own interests. In an effort to subvert and reclaim these narratives, a significant portion of Black Theology focuses on engaging with Christianity through the lens of “the oppressed black community” (Cone 1970). They claim that examining mainstream, dominant narratives of Christianity through this lens reveals new narratives according to which Jesus fundamentally identifies with the oppressed, and serves as a liberator for his people.

Much of Black Theology originates in slave narratives which communicate self-narratives as well as ongoing narratives of injustice and oppression (Hopkins & Cummings 1991). These narratives were and are woven into an overall Christian metanarrative which in turn is often communicated primarily through narrative, in the form of preaching. Narrative communications of Christianity are often seen as more apt, and practically advantageous given that they are often more compelling, and easier to remember, and communicate than their non-narrative counterparts. These narratives provide hope for a future in which God liberates his people, both here on earth and in the afterlife.

**Feminist Theology and Narrative**

While Black Theology is thoroughly narrative, Feminist Theology’s relationship with narrative is a bit more conflicted. Some feminist theologians claim that a large portion of mainline feminist theology is not narratival (Greene-McCreight 2000). Others go so far as to claim that feminism and Narrative Theology are fundamentally incompatible(Daly 1985). They claim that biblical narratives, Christian theology and Christian religion are inherently sexist and oppressive.

However, others provide compelling defenses of the claim that Narrative Theology can align with feminist concerns (Jones 2000). This can occur once oppressive Christian narratives are challenged and subsequently reclaimed or replaced – rather than rejected – such that they affirm feminist values (Fulkerson & Briggs 2012). Once this readjustment takes place, Christian narratives can be reclaimed and correctly understood as deeply rooted inliberation (Reuther 1981). Some maintain that this reclaiming enables the believer to simultaneously be both vulnerable and personally empowered (Coakley 2002).

Self-narratives enable women to attest to their experiences, especially those of injustice – and interestingly, some claim that these narratives may also be embodied as “bio-texts” – in which the physical body bears witness to the violence done against it (Kirk-Duggan 2010). These individual self-narratives can also serve as means by which women more fully claim their rightful roles as moral agents and moral interpreters, empower and show solidarity with each other, and retain their unique identities when engaging with the larger Christian metanarrative (Greene-McCreight 2000; Jones 2000). These self-narratives and reclaimed Christian narratives may then be used to reinterpret the past, and imagine the future, such that women are able to take on new religious identities (Fulkerson & Briggs 2012).

**Life’s Meaning and Narrative**

As a concept, the meaning of life largely centers on a triad of ideas: intelligibility or sense-making, purpose, and significance. These can apply at the personal level of meaning *in* life or the cosmic level of the meaning *of* life. The former focuses on a putative value that one’s life can possess to some degree or another, whereas the latter focuses on the putative meaning *of it all*.

Narrative resources can aid us in framing and answering questions about life’s meaning at both levels. On the personal level, one might think that a meaningful life is one that is significant in virtue of appropriately orienting around worthwhile goals and relationships. In turn, such a life is intelligible—it makes sense or fits together properly. One way of construing this fittingness is through narrative. A meaningful life might be, in some sense, like a good story.

Narrative is also in play in related discussions. For example, some argue that the shape of a life and distribution patterns of momentary well-being matter greatly in judging that life (Slote 1984). A life that begins well and ends poorly may be worse off than a life with the reverse trajectory even if they both have the same amount of discreet, momentary well-being. Others, appealing to narrative ending, claim that the way our lives end is especially important for appraising them.

Narrative also can illumine facets of the grander meaning of life, though connections here remain underexplored. Some analytic philosophers have proposed views, though largely inchoate, linking narrative to life’s meaning (Seachris 2009). These views claim that to know the meaning of life is to know the overarching, *meta*-narrative of the universe. We seek to make sense of it all, especially our place within the whole. We desire a narrative framework through which to understand our origin, purpose(s), value, significance, pain, and ultimately our destiny; and to guide our pursuit of meaningful life.

***See also*:** EOPR0129; EOPR0136; EOPR0137; EOPR0387

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