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The Use of Fiction in Apologetics

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Abstract: *Apologetics is the practice of providing a logical defense for Christian beliefs. At first glance, it might seem that creative arts, like fiction, have little to offer this endeavor. Typically, stories are not considered arguments, and arguments are the backbone of any rational defense. However, in this essay, we propose that imaginative storytelling does have a meaningful role in apologetics. In the first section, we will examine how fiction impacts its audience and explain how those effects can support the goals of apologetics. In the second section, we will argue that, although imaginative narratives are valuable, their role is limited: they must enhance an argument, not stand in its place.*

Key Words: *aesthetics, apologetics, barriers to belief, epistemology, narrative apologetics, philosophy of literature*

> It was Dr. Ransom who first saw that our only chance was to publish in the form of fiction what would certainly not be listened to as fact.[1]
>
> ~C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*

In the above epigraph, Lewis suggests fiction has the power to overcome a barrier to belief that mere statement of fact does not. In this essay, we will argue that fictional narratives can help to overcome what we call psychological barriers to considering the truth of Christianity, even if those narratives are unable to justify the truth of Christianity's claims. First, we will distinguish between epistemic and psychological barriers to belief. Second, in line with several prominent apologists, we will defend a legitimate use of fiction in apologetics. Finally, we will argue that providing good reasons to believe that Christian beliefs are true is the primary aim of the apologetic task. Hence, fiction cannot *replace* the traditional task of presenting good reasons to believe to anyone willing to hear.

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (HarperCollins, 1938), 160.

Epistemic and Psychological Barriers to Belief

There are at least two causes for resisting Christianity. Epistemic barriers to Christianity's claims arise when a non-believer possesses either one of two types of defeaters. A non-believer may have an undercutting defeater that challenges the reliability or justification for the claim. Or, a non-believer may have a rebutting defeater in which they directly challenge the truth of a claim. If someone objects to the rationality of Christianity, or the existence of God, or provides an argument against any claim of Christianity, these would be rightly called epistemic barriers. A Christian should try to overcome these epistemic barriers with rational arguments such as arguments for the existence of God or the reliability of the Bible or by showing that the epistemic barrier is flawed. In addition to epistemic barriers, we should also recognize barriers to belief that are not epistemic. Other psychological barriers to belief arise in the non-believer as a result of experience, emotions, or desires. As John Feinberg writes,

> Though it is possible for a feeling or conviction that something is true to be based on the objective certainty with which that belief has been confirmed, this does not always happen. Perhaps … there are psychological factors that make it difficult for [a person] to evaluate as sufficient a case you make for a given belief. This is not unusual. For example, someone presented with a case for the resurrection of Christ which, by rules of reason and argument, makes that belief 95 percent objectively certain, may have a family member or friend who has experienced significant tragedy. As a result, he finds it hard to believe in God or anything else related to religion. Though he understands all the arguments and evidence you have presented, he will never be subjectively persuaded that you have proved Christ's resurrection. Moreover, because of his ill feelings toward God, he can't bring himself to grant that … you have made a case for the resurrection that makes it even 70 percent objectively certain.[2]

Overcoming psychological barriers sometimes requires tremendous effort. For example, the pressure of familial obligation that is often described by people converting from Islam or Mormonism may cause an overwhelming fear of abandoning long-held beliefs. For some, it is difficult to imagine how one can look to God as a loving father when one has only experienced an absent or abusive earthly father. For others, there is no reason to look forward to a heavenly kingdom if this world is "as good

[2] John Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Crossway, 2013), 87.

as it gets."

The Role of Fiction

Belief, disbelief, and withholding of judgment are all examples of propositional attitudes. If we believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, we think that the proposition, *Jesus Christ rose from the dead* is true. When one disbelieves a proposition, one believes that the proposition is false. If one neither believes nor disbelieves a proposition, one withholds judgment. What these attitudes have in common is that they are aimed at getting to the truth. Primarily, apologetics is concerned with offering good reasons to believe that propositions such as *God exists* or *Jesus Christ rose from the dead* are true.

In addition to truth-aimed attitudes, we also have other kinds of attitudes to propositions. We may believe that Jesus will return for his people. But in addition, we may *hope* that he will return. We believe that we will die one day, but we also *fear* that we will die. Alternatively, we may believe that it is raining but *wish* it wasn't. These latter kinds of attitudes are not truth-aimed. Rather, they are satisfaction-aimed, aimed at having the truth or falsehood of a proposition satisfy a desire.

Some recent work in apologetics suggests that we should contend both for the truth of the Christian faith and its satisfying content. For example, Paul Gould, Keith Loftin, and Travis Dickenson define apologetics as "an attempt to remove obstacles or doubts to, as well as offer positive reasons for, believing that Christianity is *true and satisfying*." [3] They claim that apologetics is not only a rational defense of Christianity, but an attempt to show that it is satisfies a particular set of human desires. Similarly, Douglas Groothuis defines apologetics as giving answers to both "Is the Christian worldview true and rational?" and "Is it worth believing and living out?"[4] Groothuis contends that, in addition to offering a compelling case for Christianity, the apologist should present the Christian worldview as "subjectively engaging."[5]

One way to make Christianity psychologically compelling is to use imaginative narratives. Alister McGrath describes *narrative* apologetics as "an approach to affirming, defending, and explaining the Christian faith by

[3] Paul M. Gould, Travis Dickinson, and R. Keith Loftin, *Stand Firm: Apologetics and the Brilliance of the Gospel* (B&H Academic, 2018), 3 (emphasis added).

[4] Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (IVP Academic, 2011), 23.

[5] Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 10.

telling stories."[6] McGrath argues that by telling a story to convey the gospel, one is communicating "the vitality of the Christian gospel faithfully and effectively to our culture."[7] Similarly, Holly Ordway says that apologetics should demonstrate the "power, and beauty of Christianity" in addition to its truth.[8] The aim of the use of imaginative stories is to enable people to consider the truth. Sometimes people will not even listen to an argument until one has cleared a way for them to listen by getting them to think what one says is of significant value. Ordway asks, "why should people listen to us?" The answer is that people need, "some sort of imaginative engagement with the idea, or at least the possibility, that there might be something worth seeing."[9]

For these apologists, a defense of the Christian faith involves both giving rational arguments and demonstrating that Christianity is satisfying and worth believing, elements of the apologetic task which are not primarily epistemic in nature, nor a traditional component of an apologetics curriculum.

The Effects of Fiction

How does fiction serve to overcome psychological barriers? Catherine Elgin argues that the arts in general have the capacity to change peoples' perspective. She writes, "If the arts effect and enable valuable reconfigurations and reconceptions, they *enhance understanding* whether or not they disclose new facts."[10] Though fiction is not aimed at describing the real world—although it cannot fail to do so to some degree—it does aid us to understand it better. Suppose a child experiences constant tension and conflict in her home. A fictional story could help her reconceive the idea of a family as people who love one another. A fiction can describe situations in which siblings work together, and parents teach and love their children with gentleness. In so doing, the fiction could aid someone with negative attitudes toward family to consider a more positive version. As Martha Nussbaum suggests, by imagining ourselves as someone else or in another situation, we can come to see something not immediately evident to our senses. She writes,

[6] Alistair McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (Baker, 2019), 7.

[7] McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 17.

[8] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 11.

[9] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination,* 4.

[10] Catherine Z. Elgin, "Art in the Advancement of Understanding," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39.1 (Jan 2002): 2 (emphasis added).

> When we examine our own lives, we have so many obstacles to correct vision, so many motives to blindness and stupidity.… A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life.[11]

The advantage of the use of fiction is that it allows a reader (or listener) to entertain propositions about states of affairs in the safety of an alternative world. Entertaining an alternative state of affairs gives the reader the opportunity to evaluate and deliberate over whether the state of affairs in the possible world has any potential application in the actual world. And they can do that without the weight of the propositional attitudes that hinder them in the actual world.

Christians who write fictional stories can give their readers ways to imagine what it would be like to live under the rule of a good and loving king. People living under a tyrant may have no experience of a good authority figure. Tolkien's story of Aragorn rising to the throne, overcoming evil, and caring for his people with love and charity can introduce to a good king previously unconsidered. Someone unfamiliar with the concept of self-sacrifice may not understanding why one would allow themselves to be killed in the place of another, especially someone who betrayed them. But Lewis's story of Aslan's death for Edmond could display the grace that such an action could require. A new believer might not have any concept for what it means to fight temptation, but John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* might image the determination of someone pushing toward a higher good than the immediate pleasure of sin. Fictional stories cannot give evidence that there actually was a man named Jesus who took God's punishment in the place of all humanity, but they can give new perspectives to a reader that might help them better understand the message of the gospel.

The Limits of Fiction

Although fiction may have a powerful role in apologetics to affect the removal of psychological barriers to belief, its use is not unlimited. Although fiction may have a role in an argument, it cannot replace an argument.

Giving reasons for the truth and rationality of Christianity is part of our obligations to the Lord (1 Pet 3:15). Argument is *essential* to apologetics. Providing reasons for our hope is also the means by which we serve

[11] Martha Nassbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 162.

those who are interested in the truth. As Greg Welty argues,

> Useful Christian apologetics is incompatible with two kinds of people: the fearful and the over-confident. The fearful are too afraid to lay their cards on the table, while the over-confident engage in sleight of hand to effect a quick outcome when no one is looking. Both approaches hide the truth, though for different reasons, and so neither approach really makes a case. But anxious secrecy and cynical manipulation have a habit of disappointing people who are really interested in the truth. Make a case! Have faith that you can do it …, plan to be persistent in doing it …, think hard about how to do it …, and then do your best, being open to correction by others.[12]

As Welty suggests, since making a case for our Christian beliefs is essential to supporting their truth, we ought not abandon case-making and replace arguments with telling imaginative narratives. To do so would be to fail the very people we are seeking to reach.

Although an imaginative narrative has a kind of persuasive force, it is not an argument. As Holly Ordway states, "narrative is not *in itself* an argument—and much of the difficulty of modern apologetics engagement … stems from the confusion between the two."[13] Any confusion between narrative and argument will likely result in an argument-free apologetic, but this is to leave out what is essential. As Ordway urges, "The imaginative approach must be paired with argument. It cannot stand alone."[14]

Ordway's point is not that a fictional story cannot be *part* of a case. Her point is that fictional stories are not themselves arguments. Consider the use of an imaginative story given by Nathan, the prophet, to David in 2 Sam 12:1–15. From Nathan's case against him, David learns that he is guilty of immoral actions (the affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband). Nathan tells a story in which a wealthy man cannot bear to kill one of his own animals for a guest, so he takes the only animal a poor man owns and uses that instead. Provoking anger in the king over such an immoral act, David calls for the wealthy man to be punished. Nathan then tells David that his actions are of the same kind as the wealthy man in the story. The story has played a role in Nathan's case against David, but the story itself isn't an argument. Nathan could have made the case without the story. He could have pointed out that adultery and murder are immoral actions and that David had done both. But the story could

[12] Greg Welty, "Richard Swinburne," in *The History of Apologetics*, ed. Benjamin Forrest, Joshua Chatraw, and Alister McGrath (Zondervan, 2020), 728–29.

[13] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 156.

[14] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 149.

not replace the argument. Nathan is explicit in his use of the story as an analogy for what David has done. If David is rightly indignant about the wealthy man in the story, then he ought to be at least as provoked by his own actions. But the story itself does not contain these premises.[15]

In addition to the story serving a role in an argument, its force provokes a felt reaction in the king. About the incident, Gordon Graham writes, "[David's] own immoral conduct with respect to Uriah and Bathsheba is being brought in evidence against him. Nathan's imaginary story … compels David to see the reality of what he, David, has done."[16] The story brings about a strong reaction in David. He is angered by the actions of the wealthy man in the story. When he realizes that the anger he has toward the wealthy man in the story should be directed at himself, his grief over his own sin follows. It is the story that makes the difference.

In the same way, fictional narratives serve a powerful role in a Christian apologetic. They can help unbelievers to see Christianity's beauty and goodness and even appreciate the gravity of their own sin. Nonetheless, removing epistemic barriers will require presenting good arguments.

Conclusion

We have argued that fictional narratives can help to overcome psychological barriers to belief in Christianity. Hence, they have a role to play in Christian apologetics. However, apologetics is essentially an activity of producing, evaluating, and rebutting arguments. Therefore, attempting to replace argument with narrative would fail to give a reason for our hope.

[15] It might be the case that David could have supplied the additional premises to the argument without any additional comment from Nathan. But that still requires the story to be put to a use in an argument rather than replacing the argument entirely.

[16] Gordan Graham, *Philosophy, Art, and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 100.