



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Do religious fictionalists face a problem of evil?

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### Abstract

Much of the literature on religious fictionalism has emphasized that religious fictionalists employing a theistic fiction cannot just leave evil out of the fiction, and that on the contrary, they face worries that very closely parallel the worries raised by the problem of evil. This article argues that when religious fictionalism is construed most charitably, these worries do not arise. It explores three fictionalist approaches to evil (Excision, Completeness, and Inconsistency), shows that each can serve religious fictionalist ends, and recommends a pluralist stance towards them.

**Keywords:** evil; Le Poidevin; religious fictionalism; Robson; suffering

### Introduction

There are quite a few positions going by the name ‘religious fictionalism’ (hereafter ‘RF’).<sup>1</sup> Some are designed with disbelief in mind, others merely with a lack of belief, still others not even that.<sup>2</sup> Some are descriptive, others evaluative, still others both.<sup>3</sup> Some utilize a notion of non-doxastic acceptance, others do not.<sup>4</sup> Some involve pretence or make-believe, others don’t.<sup>5</sup> And as with all philosophical labels, the boundaries are fuzzy.

Here is a general characterization. RF takes religious sentences to have uses that are independent of truth or falsity, even though it takes them to be truth-apt. It also takes these sentences to be about what they seem to be about, namely religious subject matters (rather than aspects of the natural or social world).

Now take the key doctrines of (classical) theistic religions. (This article focuses on theistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because the problem of evil most straightforwardly arises for them.) RF about these will target such sentences as ‘There is a personal divine being who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent’. Thus, RF takes such sentences to have uses that are independent of truth and falsity.

As is well-known, theism faces a problem of evil.<sup>6</sup> More surprisingly, it has been suggested by Robson (2015) that RF too faces various worries generated by the problem of evil. This article argues that when RF is construed most charitably, these worries do not arise. It explores three religious fictionalist approaches to evil (Excision, Completeness, and Inconsistency), shows that each can serve RFist ends, and recommends a pluralist stance towards them.

### Excising Evil

Jon Robson (2015) asks whether someone who possesses a certain fictionalist attitude towards theism has anything to fear from the problem of evil. Robson characterizes

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this attitude as one that is not truth-normed, and thus not belief. Truth and falsity do not matter to how licit it is to have that attitude towards a given religious sentence.<sup>7</sup>

Let's briefly pause to compare this to certain forms of fictionalism about morality. Joyce advocates 'making a fiction of' morality in the sense that one assents to (selected) moral sentences in all but the most 'critical contexts', and dissents from them only in those contexts (Joyce (2001), 192). This fictionalist moral practitioner arguably is adopting a kind of non-doxastic but nonetheless positive attitude towards moral sentences that is not truth-normed. They may outwardly resemble a believer in moral truths most of the time, but their attitude towards morality is importantly different. Their fictionalist attitude lies on a spectrum of stances, at the most familiar end of which lies the attitude we all adopt with respect to fiction.

Similarly, the RFist is 'making a fiction of' religion. Where exactly on Joyce's spectrum one takes the RFist to be, thereby locating themselves (and whether one even takes there to be a good answer to this question), is something that different versions of RF will differ over.<sup>8</sup>

What gets included in the fiction? For morality, the moral fictionalist may have to make some choices based on the particular role they see the moral fiction as playing. Similarly, the RFist may make choices about which particular religion(s) to focus on, and which religious texts and religious doctrines to include in the religious fiction, where these choices will be based on the uses they see the fiction as having. Some of the texts may already be in story form, but the RFist may also include other parts. For classical theistic religions, one key element of the fiction is the claim that there is a personal divine being who is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Does the story also include suffering/evil? (I'll use the terms 'evil' and 'suffering' interchangeably.)

The first option Robson considers when it comes to RFist stances on evil is that of not including in the religious fiction the kind of suffering that generates the problem of evil ('evil of a certain kind or intensity or . . .'). Call this the 'Excision Approach'. He describes this as 'merely sidestepping the question' and dismisses it as a non-starter. His first objection is that religious content sometimes includes dire evils that a non-theist does not posit, such as the suffering of the damned (1). His second objection is that it is an important part of theistic religious practice to interact with God in response to evil, for example by praying for those in need (2). Both (1) and (2) are intended to highlight the ways in which suffering is actually essential to theism, especially when theism is understood not just as a philosophical doctrine but as the basis of a religious way of life. The question is, do they justify treating the Excision Approach as a non-starter? I'll take them in reverse order, with special emphasis on (2) (which Robson also treats as the main objection).

As mentioned, (2) concerns the loss of important aspects of religious practice, such as petitionary prayer on behalf of those in need. More generally, the worry is that the 'religious response to suffering' will be out of reach. This point is also emphasized by Robin Le Poidevin (see e.g. Le Poidevin (2003) and (2019), in contrast to his former stance in Le Poidevin (1996)). Suffering is religiously relevant, Le Poidevin (2019) insists; a RFist who leaves it out of the fiction misses out on the moral crises and opportunities for moral and spiritual growth it provides and engages in mere escapism.

Suffering is of course religiously relevant. Indeed, many first come to a religious worldview because of suffering they undergo in their personal lives. Moreover, since suffering is one defining element of the human condition, religion as a whole could be seen as a response to and a(n attempted) way of making sense of it.

Now, the Excision Approach does not envision excising all evils – only suffering of *the kind that raises the problem of evil*. Robson deliberately leaves this underspecified ('evil of a certain kind of intensity or . . .'), but it is clear what kinds of events he has in mind ('horrific evils', 'dire evils', 'terrible tragedies'). I'll speak of 'horrific evils'. (In setting things up

in this way, Robson is in effect assuming that only certain instances of suffering raise the problem, or at least that certain instances are rather more problematic for theists than others. Since I am responding to Robson's argument concerning the Excision Approach as he outlines it, it is dialectically appropriate for me to follow suit. But wherever relevant to my argument, I'll return to and explicitly comment on the dialectical significance of this assumption.)

Whether and in what sense horrific evils in fact raise the problem for a given theist at a given time depends a bit on the theist, and on what kind of problem is at issue. Suppose that one sees a difference between a theoretical/philosophical version of the problem of evil and a pastoral/spiritual one. One way to think of the difference is as follows. The former is about the viability of theism. The latter is about how to live in the face of horrific evils as a theist experiencing doubts about God's nature and perhaps crises of faith. (Of course the former can play a role in the latter.)

Is there an equivalent to the pastoral/spiritual problem that is accessible to a non-theist who is also a RFist?<sup>9</sup> Can a RFist experience anything comparable to doubts about God's benevolent nature or crises of faith? In one place, Le Poidevin suggests that there may be an equivalent:

Awareness of the fictional nature of what is being said and appealed to may at any point break in upon [the RFist's] sincere attempt to immerse herself in the fiction. Dealing with that dissonance, resisting its disruptive effect, bears some comparison to the [theist's] attempt to cope with doubt. Further, [the RFist's] loyalty to her chosen fiction may be tested from time to time, when it confronts her with uncomfortable moral, psychological, or spiritual truths, and on those occasions some effort of will is required not simply to abandon it. (Le Poidevin (2016), 187)

Granted that there is a certain structural parallel in the psychological predicaments faced by the RFist and the theist. But even with respect to the point about loyalty to the fiction, there are also undeniable differences. Not only must the RFist exert an effort of will not to simply abandon the religious fiction, she must also exert an effort of will to make it the case that an effort of will is required (to abandon the fiction). The fiction, by its very nature, is not going to be felt as binding in the same way or to the same degree as are the expectations and rights of a divine being with whom one takes oneself to be in a relationship. The same point holds with respect to doubts about God's nature. For the theist, these will be doubts about the nature of a being with whom the theist, qua theist, feels they are inevitably in a relationship, whether that relationship is a flourishing one or not. For the RFist, there is more leeway about how to think of the fictional God and which events to include in the religious fiction. The RFist focusing on classical theism will want to include all of God's omni-attributes. Do they have to include horrific evils?

One thought that should be resisted here is the suspicion that the RFist who chooses to excise horrific evils is somehow doing something as morally objectionable as would be a theist who denies the existence of horrific evils (e.g. in the sense that they deny that salient examples of horrific evils, such as certain historical events, really happened). After all, for the RFist, there are always two distinct elements in play. One is the religious fiction, and the other is the RFist's worldview. Horrific evils may be included in the latter without being included in the former.<sup>10</sup>

What about the charge of escapism though? One could object that while the theist described in the previous paragraph is doing something morally objectionable, they are not subject to the charge of escapism, while the RFist, especially the excising RFist, is.

Actually, it does not seem obvious that this particular kind of theist is not engaging in escapism. More importantly, if there is an escape involved in the Excision Approach, that

escape may be conducted in a very self-aware manner, perhaps even in a way that serves to remind the RFist of the very fictitiousness of a world without horrific evils. Perhaps the reason the excising RFist chooses to keep horrific evil out of the religious fiction is precisely that they have given the problem of evil much thought and judge it to be intractable.

But can the excising RFist ‘preserve’ the practice in the intended ways? Of particular concern, as we’ve seen, is the problem of what could possibly replace petitionary prayer on behalf of those in need. Before focusing again on horrific evils, it is necessary to consider the general question of what becomes of petitionary prayer on RF. (I’ll be brief here as this has been discussed elsewhere by Le Poidevin (1996), Eshleman (2005), and Deng (2015).) In line with the discussion so far, when it comes to prayer, the RFist’s experience again differs in important ways from the theist’s. Prayer is fundamentally altered, because it is no longer a conversation or two-way interaction (which for the theist it always is, even if God’s role is merely to listen and care).

At the same time, it would not be accurate to insist that the RFist’s prayer-like activities are necessarily more akin to certain forms of meditation than to prayer. The truth is that the experiential boundaries here are fuzzy. Moreover, there is a spectrum of activities available to the RFist, and that spectrum extends to an activity that centrally relies on imagining an addressee, unlike in certain forms of meditation. Even when the RFist merely ‘mentally goes through the motions’ of prayer and utters theistic formulations of prayer without believing them, there is an experiential remainder that makes the activity at least in some cases into something that is best characterized as make-believe prayer. In a similar context, Le Poidevin (2016) describes the need not only to coolly contemplate an ideal of pure love but to enter imaginatively into it.<sup>11</sup> Religious practices and rituals are designed to do exactly this, and they were shaped partly by the need to produce the right emotional engagement, even in the case of theistic participants. These practices and rituals are, among other things, sensitive to the peculiarities of human emotional capacities, some of which are less bound up with ontological beliefs that one might have supposed. In particular, make-believe prayer involves immersing oneself in a practice designed to give expression to a sense of dependence or helplessness, to provide an occasion for calling out for those in need *even if* and sometimes perhaps precisely because there is, in reality, no one listening. Andrew Eshleman writes: ‘[The RFist] may engage in intercessory prayer for those in some dire need, not because [they believe] there is some chance thereby of effecting some aid, . . . but simply because in doing so [they] symbolically [declare] that [they are] for those in need’ (Eshleman (2005), 195).

This is a *sui generis* activity that cannot be expected to replicate all aspects of the theist’s experience. As Eshleman says, the RFist cannot pray for those in need *because they hope this may help those in need*. But it does not follow that there is no experiential point whatsoever. One might add that the point of petitionary prayer for the theist is not confined to increasing the probability that God will help the victims in any tangible way, not even only by a small amount. That is, the theist may sometimes find that there is a point to asking for help that is independent of what God is likely to do in response, simply because asking feels right. And while the theist is admittedly thereby doing something fundamentally different, the experiences are not so far apart as to allow for no overlap.

Suppose, then, that some sense can be made of a RFist equivalent of petitionary prayer. If that is so, then doesn’t that further support the claim that the Excision Approach bars the RFist from an important aspect of the religious life, namely that of praying specifically for the victims of horrific evils? This, it will be recalled, is Robson’s main reason to think the Excision Approach is a non-starter.

While Robson is right to draw attention to limitations of the Excision Approach, this conclusion (that the Excision Approach is a non-starter) is rather too strong. The

approach has limitations in that it serves some RFist ends better than others, but it should not be dismissed out of hand, for several reasons.

First, RF is often motivated by practice-related considerations, and these can be varied. For instance, RFists may differ over which sources of value they see religious practice as providing, or which (theistic) religious tradition they are focused on. An RFist may feel an affinity with a tradition for reasons relating to their upbringing, or natural affinities, or their life trajectories and circumstances. The values and uses they seek may include any or all of the following, with potentially varying emphases: inspiration, personal or spiritual or moral growth, comfort, cosmic or communal belonging, identity, edification, support, hope, meaning, and so on. In fact, RF by its very nature has the potential to lead away from exclusivist stances on what counts as 'the' religious life, and towards thinking in terms of a plurality of forms of life that are to different degrees and in different ways religiously engaged. Given that this is so, it would be a tall order to show that a given RFist approach to evil is unable to serve any RFist ends.

The second reason to proceed with caution is that the argument puts a lot of weight on the significance of the religious response to horrific evil/suffering in particular, as opposed to evil/suffering in general. Even if one takes the RFist to intend to 'preserve' religious practice as completely as possible, since RF does differ from theism, the RFist practice is likely to differ in many ways from the original. Given that this is so, where would one more expect such differences than in the RFist's treatment of horrific evil? Even if there is something of value lost, including the possibility of praying for the victims of horrific evils, how plausible is it that there is nothing of value left? Here are some reasons not to find it very plausible.

To start with the most obvious one, the Excision Approach leaves plenty of room for petitionary (make-believe) prayer and other religious responses to situations that do not involve horrific evil.<sup>12</sup> (Given typical motivations for RF, there are bound to be RFists who do not take most instances of sufferings and/or undesirable states of affairs to be in clear tension with theism; some, on the contrary, are likely to think theism has much to offer when it comes to making sense of some of these. These are the kinds of RFists to whom this benefit of the Excision Approach is available.) For instance, there will probably be many instances in which a RFist might want to ask for divine help for those undergoing painful struggles in their lives, even though those struggles are not so inexplicable as to clash with theism. This relates back to the point that evil/suffering is religiously relevant, and that many actually become theists as a response to it. Often such theists will not, in retrospect, think of these life events as ones that raise the problem of evil, but rather as evidence of God's acting or attempting to act in their lives and perhaps also of their own resistance. These rather significant aspects of religious practice are as accessible on the Excision Approach as they are on other RFist approaches to evil.<sup>13</sup>

Relatedly, there are clear aesthetic and experiential motivations not to include reflections on horrific evil in every moment of religious engagement, and the theist often makes a similar choice. After all, the problem of evil is called a 'problem' for a reason. The theist too is likely to have moments when they simply feel themselves immersed in God's love. Presumably, in at least some of those moments, they are not simultaneously focusing on lots of intense, apparently pointless instances of suffering and struggling to make sense of these.

Finally, consider what happens when the theist does choose to keep horrific evil firmly in mind. Recall the distinction between a philosophical and a pastoral problem of evil. The latter is a personal problem of potentially existential dimensions. Insofar as a theist is, at a given time, troubled by the pastoral problem, this may well momentarily detract from their ability to call on God for help for the victims. Admittedly, the psychological realities are likely to be complex, and actual social work (for instance) probably always involves

both the potential for doubts about God's nature and a deep concern for the victims. Nonetheless, these two elements of a theist's experience pull in opposite directions. The more a theist is able to feel that God is universally loving and powerful and knowledgeable, the more they are able to call on that love to ask for support for the victims. The less sure they are of these things, the less they are able to do this.

Both these elements (of crises of faith and of prayer for victims of horrific evils) are out of reach for the excising RFist. But that they pull in opposite directions is significant. For one thing, this duality inherent in the theist's experience underscores that the importance of prayer for the victims of horrific evils cannot be a *uniquely* meaningful aspect of the religious life, the subtraction of which leaves RF without a point, especially if the RFist's inability to mimic true crises of faith is also a loss. For another, it suggests that while the theist is praying for victims of horrific evils, they are more likely to be approaching the problem as a philosophical problem than a pastoral one, and that means that although no 'excising' is going on for them, there may sometimes be a certain amount of emotional distancing. This in turn suggests that while the RFist in general is doing something very different from the theist, the excising RFist in particular is doing something that may have a psychological parallel in the theist. If there is something to the charge of escapism, a fair evaluation of that charge needs to place it alongside this aspect of theism.

Consider also (1), the other objection Robson raises to the Excision approach, namely that religious content sometimes includes dire evils that a non-theist does not posit, such as the suffering of the damned. Again, there can be losses here, but their significance for a given RFist depends on whether they had reasons to include those further claims in the religious fiction. Theists themselves have a variety of views on these matters, and RFists correspondingly have choices to make about what to include. If a RFist wants to mimic, in particular, a theistic practice that gives an essential role to horrific evils like the suffering of the damned, then the Excision Approach is unlikely to be the best choice for them.

More generally, the contention is merely that the Excision Approach can serve some RFist ends and therefore fit some versions of RF. That is enough not to dismiss it as a non-starter. Since there are a variety of motivations one might have for RF and for engaging in RFist practice, it is to be expected that some of these will not fit well with the Excision Approach. As another illustration of this, consider Peter Lipton's insistence that the RFist cannot pick and choose which parts of a religious text to endorse, by selectively engaging only with some. Instead, on Lipton's own 'immersion view, . . . we have the text to use in its full, unexpurgated form, the form in which . . . it can do us the most good as a tool for thinking and for living' (Lipton (2007), 45). Although one can question whether Lipton's own view really retains the religious texts in their full, unexpurgated form, as does Deng (2015), insofar as a form of RF is in fact opposed to selection, it may well also be opposed to Excision.

### Alternatives to Excision

This brings us to other RFist approaches to evil. The Excision Approach posited horrific evils within the RFist's worldview, but not within the religious fiction. But now suppose there are salient RFist ends that are best served by keeping horrific evils *within* the religious fiction, that is, by considering theism and horrific evils *side by side*. How should one think of these ends, and what might some approaches that secure these ends look like?<sup>14</sup>

Note that, as before, the important constraints are practical ones. Robson considers such considerations, but takes them to be optional additional constraints – additional, that is, to truth-like constraints which land the RFist in problems that 'very closely parallel those faced by [theists]' (Robson (2015), 358). Overall, Robson's stance is that a RFist response to the problem of evil is needed.

This way of looking at the matter is felicitous only on the most ambitious versions of RF. For instance, Robson argues that one very plausible constraint is intra-fictional consistency, because ‘religious attitudes typically connect up with action in a way in which ordinary fictions do not’, and an inconsistent fiction would generate inconsistent recommendations for action (*ibid.*, 356). Robson concludes that the RFist in any case has to have a solution to the logical problem of evil. But the issue here does not so much point to a constraint on the RFist stance on evil as to the prior question concerning how the RFist can plausibly take the religious fiction to *generate* practical recommendations at all. Robson worries that an inconsistent fiction might imply that ‘God both does and does not want [the RFist] to perform some action’ (*ibid.*). But the prior question is why it should matter to the RFist’s actions what a fictional God commands. Put simply, if one isn’t a theist (which a RFist may well not be), why obey God’s commands, whether consistent or not? While a full discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this article, it does not take much thought to see that the kind of RF Robson is exclusively targeting here has bigger problems than the problem of evil. Moreover, it should be noted that for reasons like these, other versions of RF have been put forward that more closely model the role of the religious fiction on that played by other fictions (and thus take the analogy with fiction to be quite close in the religious domain).<sup>15</sup> Thus, Le Poidevin says that ‘fiction, even religious fiction, cannot *qua* fiction, provide reasons for action, except perhaps by revealing the consequences of certain counterfactual scenarios. The mechanism, rather, is indirect, by cultivating certain sensibilities’ (Le Poidevin (2019), 55) Another way to put this point about RF is that ‘moral and other decisions may be pondered in relation to a religious story, but the story isn’t providing independent warrant’ (Deng (2015), 212).<sup>16</sup>

Granted, if the most ambitious versions of RF could be made to work, and if the practical motivations behind them involved wanting the religious fiction to deliver independent reasons for action, then one desideratum for the religious fiction presumably would be consistency, so the logical problem of evil would have to be confronted. But this is less plausible as a requirement on RF’s ‘response’ to evil in general. In fact, as a general desideratum, it tends to obscure the distinctive issue at hand, which, as we have seen, is whether RFists may have practical reasons to consider horrific evils *side by side* with theism. What this naturally leads to is rather the question of whether RFists may have reason to *welcome* some amount of cognitive dissonance (between theism and horrific evil) into the religious fiction.

It is worth reflecting on why Robson (2015) takes there to be a need for a RFist response, and in particular, why he thinks that (e.g. truth-like) constraints have to be found for the content of the religious fiction. He briefly considers a RFist position that takes the extent to which horrific evil lowers the probability of theism to have no bearing on the viability of the theistic fiction. Now, one concern one might raise about this has to do with the desirability or otherwise of perpetuating (anything resembling) religious practice (see also note 11). This, arguably, is the real challenge in this vicinity. But what Robson focuses on is whether this stance suffices as a RFist response to the problem of evil, and he thinks it does not, because he takes this stance to be most likely motivated by the rather implausible view that fiction is completely unconstrained. As Robson rightly points out, it is not. For instance, in order to still be a Judaeo-Christian theistic story, a story cannot include the claim that God only existed since last Thursday. So, he argues, some other constraint has to be produced, and truth-like constraints, along with intra-fictional consistency, are among the candidates, leading to the RFist wrestling with worries that ‘very closely parallel’ the theist’s (Robson (2015), 358).

But this argument does not achieve its aim: it effectively presupposes that the only candidate constraints would be ones similar to theistic devices for dealing with the problem of evil, by assuming that low probabilities and/or logical inconsistencies/tensions will be a problem for the religious fiction just as they would be for the theist. In what follows,

we will see some reasons to doubt this latter claim, but even if it were true, it could not be assumed in the context of this argument. Moreover, there is a straightforward answer to the question of how to constrain the fiction, which Robson himself touches on. As he rightly says, many RFists value belonging to a religious community, and while they may not be a fully 'standard' member, they surely thereby have some reason to stick to canonical versions of the religious fiction, rather than importing claims like that God only existed since last Thursday.<sup>17</sup>

So, what are some further approaches available to the RFist? Le Poidevin (2019) discusses two salient alternatives to Excision, of which he favours the second. Call these the Completeness Approach and the Inconsistency Approach.<sup>18</sup> (There is no claim here that this is an exhaustive list.)

The Completeness Approach takes as its starting point the idea that the true theodicy, even if it exists, is probably beyond human comprehension.<sup>19</sup> It then combines this with the familiar fact that most fictions leave the truth-value of some proposition(s) underdetermined. On this approach, the various theodicies on offer in the philosophical literature are propositions whose truth-value is underdetermined by the religious fiction. But it can still be true within the religious fiction that there is a true theodicy. That is, the religious fiction is *fictionally* complete: it is true in the fiction that there is a true theodicy, even though for no specific theodicy, that theodicy is true in the fiction. This approach is intended to mirror the theist's confidence that there is a solution to the problem (since there is both a God and horrific evil), even if we don't or can't know what it is.

Let Poidevin reject this as trivializing evil, and as theft over honest toil: 'the fictional fact that there is [a true theodicy] removes the conflict for [the RFist] without her ever having engaged with it' (Le Poidevin (2019), 52).

Instead, he settles on the Inconsistency Approach. Here, the RFist confronts the tension head on, by deliberately letting the bare inconsistency stand within the fiction. Le Poidevin compares this to inherently paradoxical works of art, such as certain pieces of visual art, some time travel stories, and self-referential stories in which characters are portrayed as characters. (Perhaps a good example of the latter would be Pirandello's *Six Persons in Search of an Author*.) For all these kinds of works, something of value would be lost if we tried to interpret the paradox in the story away. Similarly, the thought is that something of value may be lost from the theistic fiction were one to seek some fictional resolution. To this RFist, the constant struggle with the contradiction feels more religiously satisfying.

I'll suggest that both approaches are valuable contributions to the RFist's storybook, and that they are more similar than Le Poidevin allows. Consider how Le Poidevin sees the 'fictionalist problem of evil' arising in the first place.

A fiction in which there exists a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, but also one in which there is suffering of a kind which would ordinarily be taken as evidence against the existence of such a being, *and* in which there is no explanatory narrative which shows why this being permits that degree of suffering, is one in which there is considerable tension. (*ibid.*, 49)

While this is clearly the case, the question is in what sense the tension is problematic. Many stories do involve tensions. As mentioned, there is a potential moral problem in the vicinity, regarding whether anyone should engage in anything resembling theistic religious practice, and perhaps this problem is sharpened in light of the problem of evil. But that's not quite what Le Poidevin is describing here.

Nonetheless, Le Poidevin's concern does seem to be a moral one. The reason Le Poidevin finds Inconsistency more defensible than Completeness is that he sees the former as



aligned with the thought that any attempt to produce a theodicy and thereby to make horrific evil intelligible, even within the fiction, would itself be evil (*ibid.*). Completeness erases a struggle that should remain, and whose resolution should not even be attempted.

At the same time, Le Poidevin worries that on the Completeness Approach, the RFist 'is simply abdicating responsibility for making suffering intelligible within [their] chosen fiction' (*ibid.*, 52), by taking refuge in the claim that according to the fiction, there is a solution. It seems the RFist can't win.

In response, note first that if the Completeness Approach was morally problematic in the way envisioned by Le Poidevin, the Inconsistency Approach would hardly improve matters. An analogy with the theist's situation is helpful here. Suppose someone was morally outraged by theism. And suppose they were told the theist had decided to posit no solution, instead of a humanly incomprehensible one, only to go about their theistic ways. Surely, that would not help.

This leads to the second point, which is that it is in fact difficult to judge the moral quality of RF solely on the basis of the content of the religious fiction. It also rather matters what the RFist does with the fiction, that is, which actions constitute their fictionalistic religious practice, and what kinds of consequences those actions are likely to have. Just as the Excision Approach might appeal to a RFist precisely because they find the problem of evil intractable, so both the Completeness and the Inconsistency Approaches can in principle be part of fictionalist practices that are in various ways sensitive to the magnitude and severity of the problem of evil. (Suppose someone prefers stories in which good triumphs over evil. Whether or not this is objectionable rather depends on how it influences their actions. If, for example, it encourages them to look for ways to enable good to triumph in the real world, it would be morally useful. Thanks to an anonymous referee for the comparison.)

In the last section, I suggested that RF has the potential to lead towards thinking in terms of a plurality of forms of life that are to different degrees and in different ways religiously engaged. The relevant constraints, I have argued, are practical ones. Some of these constraints may also be empirically accessible and should then be empirically accessed (as Robson also suggests). In particular, some RFists may take religious practice to secure ends that are independent of and/or that transcend experiential goods, such as that 'those who engage in regular religious practice are, on average, happier and longer lived' or that they are 'less prone to cheating and more prone to altruistic behaviour' (see Robson (2015), 358 for references). Such RFists should gather evidence for these claims and for the claim that the benefits in question also obtain for fictionalist religious practice. For those RFists, the question of how to approach evil will be one on which empirical evidence should be brought to bear. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.) More generally, it would seem to be advisable to take up a pluralist stance towards RFist approaches to evil, precisely because there are such variegated motivations for RFist practice. There is no such thing as 'the' right RFist response to evil. Pluralism fits RF.

Like Excision, Completeness and Inconsistency each have their strengths and weaknesses, in the sense that they suit different purposes. If a RFist's reason to move away from Excision is that they wish to have a way of (make-believe) praying for the victims of horrific evils, the Completeness Approach would be a better choice for them than Excision. Note that one might further distinguish a weak and a strong version of Completeness. On the weak version, what is fictionally true is that there is a true theodicy which humans may yet and perhaps will (in the fictional future) find. It's just that no theodicy that has in real life been formulated is, according to the fiction, true. Perhaps one should add a temporal element to this, in that even if in real life more theodicies get formulated, at those later times, the religious fiction will still imply that no actually formulated theodicy is ever true, even though it is true in the fiction that there is a true theodicy, which in the fictional (always yet to come) future may and perhaps will be

found by humans. By contrast, on the strong version, even though according to the fiction there is a solution, that solution is (again according to the fiction) only knowable by God, that is, beyond human comprehension. Each of these versions of the Completeness Approach will again be suited to different ends.

Why might a RFist prefer the Inconsistency Approach? *Prima facie*, this may seem puzzling, since the key idea on this approach is that the clash between theism and horrific should remain. But the answer could be any of the following. Perhaps the RFist wishes to experience all of the tension that the theist faces in its full force, while constantly resisting the impulse to think there could be a solution, fictional or otherwise. Perhaps they appreciate the experience of an intense awareness of their finitude and helplessness in the face of both the evil and the unanswerable question it raises, which is made more poignant by the fact that the story also provides an impossible answer. Or perhaps a story that includes suffering in its full extent reminds them why anyone might *wish* for there to be an omni-God in the first place, thus motivating the rest of the story, even while the two parts clash irrevocably. Or perhaps they agree with those who think that evil poses a problem even to the non-theist, a secular problem of evil of how to go on functioning in a world where such things can happen (Prescott (2021)). In that case there may be another aesthetic and/or catharsis-related reason for simply depicting the suffering in the fiction, along with one solution that the RFist may reject in real life. Or perhaps the raw contradiction has *purely* aesthetic merit for them, in ways that more closely mirror the features of the inherently paradoxical stories and works of art Le Poidevin mentions. The list is open-ended, and more than one motivation can be present at once.

## Conclusion

I argued that when RF is most charitably construed, no worries generated by the problem of evil arise for it. Rather, there are a variety of approaches to evil that can serve different fictionalist ends; I explored three (Excision, Completeness and Inconsistency). I recommended a pluralist stance on these and other, yet to be developed RFist approaches to evil.<sup>20</sup>

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## Notes

1. For an overview, see Scott and Malcolm (2018).
2. See e.g. Deng (2015), Le Poidevin (2020) and Jay (2014), respectively.
3. In line with the wider literature on fictionalism, the term ‘prescriptive/revolutionary religious fictionalism’ tends to be used to refer to the combination of the claim that religious sentences are not now used in a (to be specified) fictionalist way and the claim that, all things considered, they ought to be.
4. See e.g. Jay (2014) and Wettstein (2012) respectively.
5. See e.g. Eshleman (2005) and Scott (2020), respectively.
6. I mostly speak of ‘the’ problem of evil, but insofar as there logical and evidential ones, I mean to include them all. I also discuss a distinction between ‘philosophical’ and ‘pastoral’ versions; this is signposted explicitly.
7. Note that while Robson first describes his topic as hermeneutic (descriptive) RF in particular, the focus is simply on what happens if someone has the attitudes in question towards theism.
8. For brevity, I use ‘RFist’ as a shorthand for both ‘proponent of RF’ and ‘religious fictionalist practitioner’.
9. I leave to one side here any ‘secular problems of evil’ (e.g. Prescott (2021)) as they would be accessible to a non-theist even without RF.
10. One could further object that the theistic stance countenanced in this paragraph is morally objectionable because beliefs have consequences for action, and that at least some of the undesirable aspects of this theist’s actions overlap with those of the RFist. In short, one could argue that what is morally objectionable in this vicinity is the continuation of anything relevantly like religious practice. The next section addresses some issues closely connected to this, but in its full generality the objection is beyond the scope of this article, since it concerns RF as such, as opposed to its relation to the problem of evil.

11. Le Poidevin describes this as a kind of meditation, but the passage fits well with the idea that the experiential boundaries are fuzzy. There is in any case no need to insist that this isn't ('real') prayer; it isn't intended to be. Make-believe prayer is *sui generis*.
12. For simplicity, I sometimes speak simply of 'prayer' in what follows, but where RFist practice is at issue, this refers to make-believe prayer.
13. Petitionary prayer is only one kind of religious activity that is relevant here, and I focus on it because it is the subject of Robson's main objection (perhaps because it is *prima facie* particularly inaccessible on RF). Other relevant activities include hearing sermons, singing hymns, grappling with one's own behaviour, etc. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.) Arguably, there will often also be limits to what is available to the RFist in some of these activities; this is a feature of RF in general, rather than of RF's stance on evil (Deng (2015)).
14. I'll continue to frame the discussion in terms of horrific evils, but much of what follows would also be relevant to the way a RFist who holds that all instances of suffering clash with theism might treat these (since such a RFist might want to keep the religious fiction realistic enough to include many such instances).
15. See e.g. Le Poidevin (2019); Deng (2015); Sauchelli (2018).
16. The religious story 'is functioning as a tool for an emotional and moral self-exploration. That exploration may re-configure [the RFist's] (non-religious) beliefs. But the new beliefs ultimately derive their warrant from the same source as the old ones, such as their relation to [their] other (non-religious) beliefs, and [their] emotional resonance with them' (Deng (2015), 205).
17. It may also be worth emphasizing that no particular response to the problem of evil is part of the canon of theistic religions (so that this cannot be a reason that some particular response should be included in the religious fiction). No such response is part of the religious canon; all are philosophical responses to the canon's clash with horrific evil.
18. I am leaving to one side a third approach discussed by Le Poidevin, because it involves modifying the *omni*-attributes and thus moving away from classical theism, which is my focus here.
19. I don't here distinguish between theodicies and defences, so 'theodicy' can also be read 'theodicy/defence'.
20. My apologies to Robin Le Poidevin, whose *Religious Fictionalism* contains a chapter with a very similar title to the title of this article.

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