

Opinion

Parables: What Are They and Why Are They Important: A Short Introduction

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Abstract

Parables are short fictional narratives that teach a moral lesson, a standard of behavior, etc. They exist in both Eastern and Western cultural traditions. There are important commonalities, as well as culturally influenced differences. I analyze parables and related story constructions from several viewpoints: history, philosophy, religion, linguistics, the neurosciences, and the biological sciences. My objective is to weave these perspectives together to allow a better understanding and to stimulate others with more specialized knowledge from many different disciplines to further delve into these complex issues. It is my hope that a better understanding of the human condition will result.

Introduction

Parables are defined narrowly in dictionaries as stories told by Jesus in the New Testament [1]. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* provides more universal definitions that encompass differences in time, culture, and content [2, 3]. Table 1 presents a modified version of a table from [3] (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Story Constructions

Feature	Parable	Fable	Allegory	Exemplum	Proverb
Length	Short	Short	Complex	Short sermon	Concise saying
Main characters	Humans in action	Animals with human traits	Multiple symbolic levels	Legendary figures, saints, kings, nobles	East and West traditions
Plot	Simple plot, may include twists	Simple plot	Complex, unfolds over time	Simple moral lesson	Concise wisdom
Purpose	Helps us understand humanity rationally and emotionally	Instructs through explicit moral lessons	Demonstrates the complexity of the human condition	Moral teaching	Practical wisdom
Interpretation	Truth and faith are foundations for understanding the human condition	Explicit moral	Multiple symbolic meanings	Ethical instruction	East: contemplation and acceptance; West: action and practical living

Life’s grand paradox is that humans are rational creatures with emotions. To live well, both are important. More importantly, all our views of life are based on beliefs. Although beliefs may be reasoned to varying degrees, they remain beliefs. This paper systematically examines these issues from several perspectives (Table 2).

Table 2: Interdisciplinary Perspectives Used in This Paper

Discipline	Contribution
History	Provides historical context for understanding the origins and enduring significance of parables.
Philosophy	Examines questions of truth, belief, knowledge, and the interpretation of human experience.
Religion	Explores the role of parables in Eastern and Western religious traditions and moral teaching.
Linguistics	Examines the meaning, structure, and communicative function of parables.
Neurosciences	Explores how the brain processes stories, learning, memory, and understanding.
Biological Sciences	Considers biological and evolutionary perspectives that contribute to understanding human behavior and the human condition.

History

Will and Ariel Durant spent a lifetime studying, recording, and learning lessons from history [4]. Their view was that past events allow one to form reasonable hypotheses about current events because, despite changes, the physical world remains the same, and so does human nature [5,6]. The Durants documented their lessons in several areas (Table 3).

Table 3: Major Themes in The Lessons of History (Durant & Durant)

Theme
Hesitations
History and the Earth
Biology and History
Race and History
Character and History
Morals and History
Religion and History
Economics and History
Socialism and History
Government and History
History and War
Growth and Decay
Is Progress Real?

Chapter 1: Hesitations

They commence with the issue of doubt. "Doubt" has been a central issue since antiquity in religion, philosophy, history, medicine, and many other disciplines [7]. They then discuss multiple lessons throughout the remaining chapters that continue to challenge modern society [8]. There is, however, an important issue, namely, how to reconcile religious ideas with the increased empirical knowledge that has accumulated since antiquity, together with philosophical analyses. This is discussed in a later section. However, this question has also been raised by several philosophers, including Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Hegel. Hegel was a crucial intellectual who ventured where his predecessors had not. They all accepted philosophical discourses based on premises that had long been established. However, Hegel questioned how we think and how we understand history and time [9]. Maritain notes that Hegel was his inspiration for engaging in the new field of the philosophy of history [10]. He vigorously argues against Hegel's conception of history, namely, conflict, synthesis, and the arc of history. History, like all things in life, can be viewed on a macro level, including major events, wars, discoveries, social and political evolution, and major constructions and inventions. However, the micro level, including the lives of common people and minorities of multiple types, is also important. I posit that considering both views provides a more complete picture of what has happened and what may likely happen. Note that there is always doubt.

Philosophy / Religion

Humans and hominids (evolutionary species) have, for millennia, been confronted by two fundamental questions: What is occurring to me and my environment, both physical and social, and why? Religion and philosophy have been the means used to confront these issues throughout much of recorded history. Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* is an authoritative source, widely read, that explores the major religions, their teachings, and their commonalities and differences [11]. He noted the importance of geographic location, including climate (weather), geology (mountains, plains, volcanoes, etc.), and the history of communication between regions in shaping societies, cultures, and religious traditions. The East, unlike the West, has a history of isolation from the rest of the world, punctuated by brief periods of profound influence [12]. This is a recurrent theme occurring across many disciplines. Over millennia, there have been multiple periods during which cultures have cross-fertilized. This is a complex story and is not expanded upon here. Even today, Eastern cultures are more contemplative and passive

than Western cultures in many respects, although, with the digital revolution and other technological advances, these differences are becoming less pronounced [13]. Eastern religions range from animism and polytheism to meditative traditions. There is a common belief that life is hard, unpredictable, and that human actions have little effect. There is no personification of a god or life force, unlike some Western religions. The West shows a different picture for multiple reasons. There were the ancient religions of civilized societies, such as Greece and Rome, coexisting and interacting with many primitive ones, such as the Gauls, Celts, and Vikings. Trade, fostered by the Mediterranean Sea and its rivers, was one root cause. Another important factor was the three monotheistic religions [14]. This belief in a personal God, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, has had a major influence on the West. It spurred the development of empiricism. Together with ancient philosophy, it also contributed to the development of modernity over the past 500 years. Philosophy has two traditions for dealing with changes in culture and religion. Simply put, there is the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, which attempts to reconcile Christianity with new empirical knowledge [15]. The other tradition is atheism [16]. It is noteworthy that both traditions require knowledge and faith. This brings us back to the beginning, namely, parables and Table 1, where parables are compared with other literary constructions.

Parables

The construction of the word *parable* is the combination of two words: *para* ("alongside") and *gwele* ("to throw" or "reach"). Hence, the word we now have as *parable* [17]. We now discuss aspects of Table 1. Parables are structured as follows: they are short in length; they involve humans doing their jobs, such as planting, herding, etc.; They possess a simple plot that may have twists, their purpose is to slowly teach a lesson to people that is applicable to all phases of their lives; and they reveal a Truth through an entertaining story to foster its effect [18]. They are unique compared with other literary constructions. They illustrate a point but vary in their characters, their words and deeds, and their spectrum of complexity, including fables, exempla, and allegories. Eastern and Western traditions, as previously stated, differ because of the factors discussed earlier. Thus, the East is more passive, contemplative, and accepting of the unfairness of the world in both the short and long term. The West is more active, striving for improvements in living conditions, seeking new environmental preservation measures, and trying novel ways to balance social justice with personal liberty. Recent research from other disciplines further demonstrates why parables are effective.

Recent Developments in Other Disciplines

There have been major developments in many fields that are relevant to this subject. A limited introduction, for the purposes of this paper, includes advances in the neurosciences [19-21]. The Human Genome Project "... changed everything..." [22]. This innovation has been the impetus for multiple projects in and outside medicine and the biological sciences. Anthropology, using this tool, has revolutionized our understanding of past civilizations [23], from foot [24] to head [25]. Biology is using "big data" [26] in multiple ways [27, 28]. Psychiatry is also taking part in this enterprise [29, 30]. All these approaches are finding physical mechanisms and trying to answer questions about the human condition, such as perception, motivation, and related phenomena.

Conclusion

However, is this all there is? Religion can never be totally debunked. Thus, a better understanding of parables, which have been used since antiquity, may open a door that allows all of us, regardless of age, to better understand universal Truths.

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